

REKI KAWAHARA

ILLUSTRATION BY

HIMA



ACCEL WORLD

22

SUN GOD OF ABSOLUTE FLAME

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VISIT...

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▶▶▶ **ACCEL•WORLD** 22

SUN GOD OF ABSOLUTE FLAME



REKI KAWAHARA

ILLUSTRATION BY **HIMA**

DESIGN BY **bee-pee**



"Perhaps we should've come dressed a little more summery for Corvus's sake."

FUKO KURASAKI

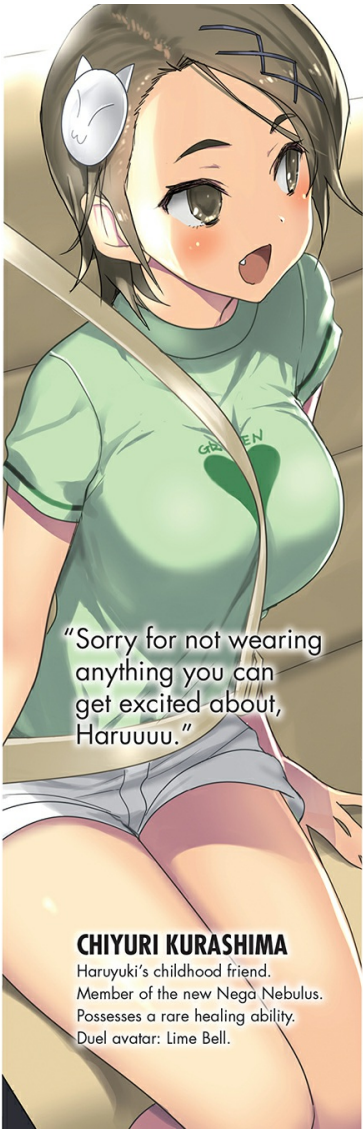
Member of the new Nega Nebulus.
Master who taught Haruyuki about Incarnate.
Duel avatar: Sky Raker.



"Haruyuki, you may be as anxious as you wish."

KUROYUKIHIME

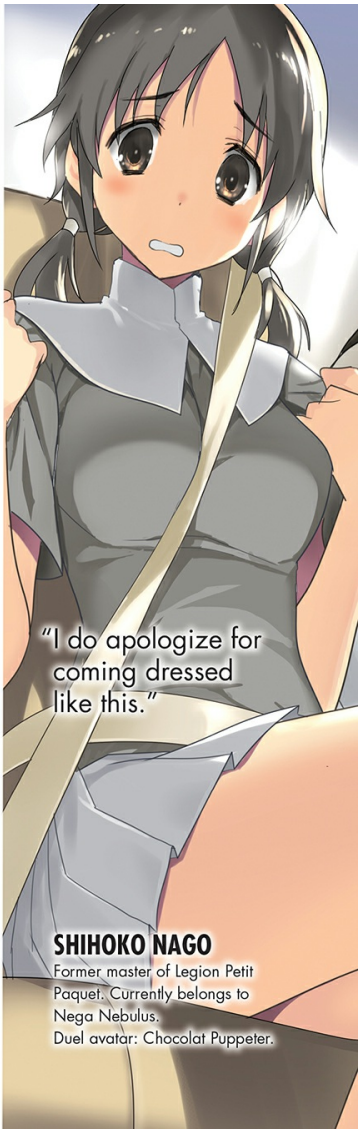
Legion Master of the new Nega Nebulus. Vice president of the Umesato Junior High student council.
Duel avatar: Black Lotus.



"Sorry for not wearing anything you can get excited about, Haruuuu."

CHIYURI KURASHIMA

Haruyuki's childhood friend.
Member of the new Nega Nebulus.
Possesses a rare healing ability.
Duel avatar: Lime Bell.



"I do apologize for coming dressed like this."

SHIHOKO NAGO

Former master of Legion Petit Paquet. Currently belongs to Nega Nebulus.
Duel avatar: Chocolat Puppeter.



PURPLE THORN
Empress Voltage

BLUE KNIGHT
Vanquish

GREEN GRANDÉ
Invulnerable

YELLOW RADIO
Radioactive Disturber

"You're late!!"

"Ivory Tower...
He really did
come, calm
as ever..."

"How dare you
dawdle in last
when you were
the ones to
convene this
meeting?!"

ASTER VINE

BLACK LOTUS
World End

SILVER CROW

SKY RAKER
Strato-Shooter



WOLFRAM CERBERUS

Duel avatar that suddenly appears in the Accelerated World. The strongest and hardest metal color. He wears the Armor of Catastrophe Mark II, created by the Acceleration Research Society.

"Paradigm Breakdown."

"It can't be..."

"Ridiculous... Impossible!"

KOTO TAKANOUCI

Close aide to Blue Knight, the Leonids' Legion Master. Duel avatar: Cobalt Blade.

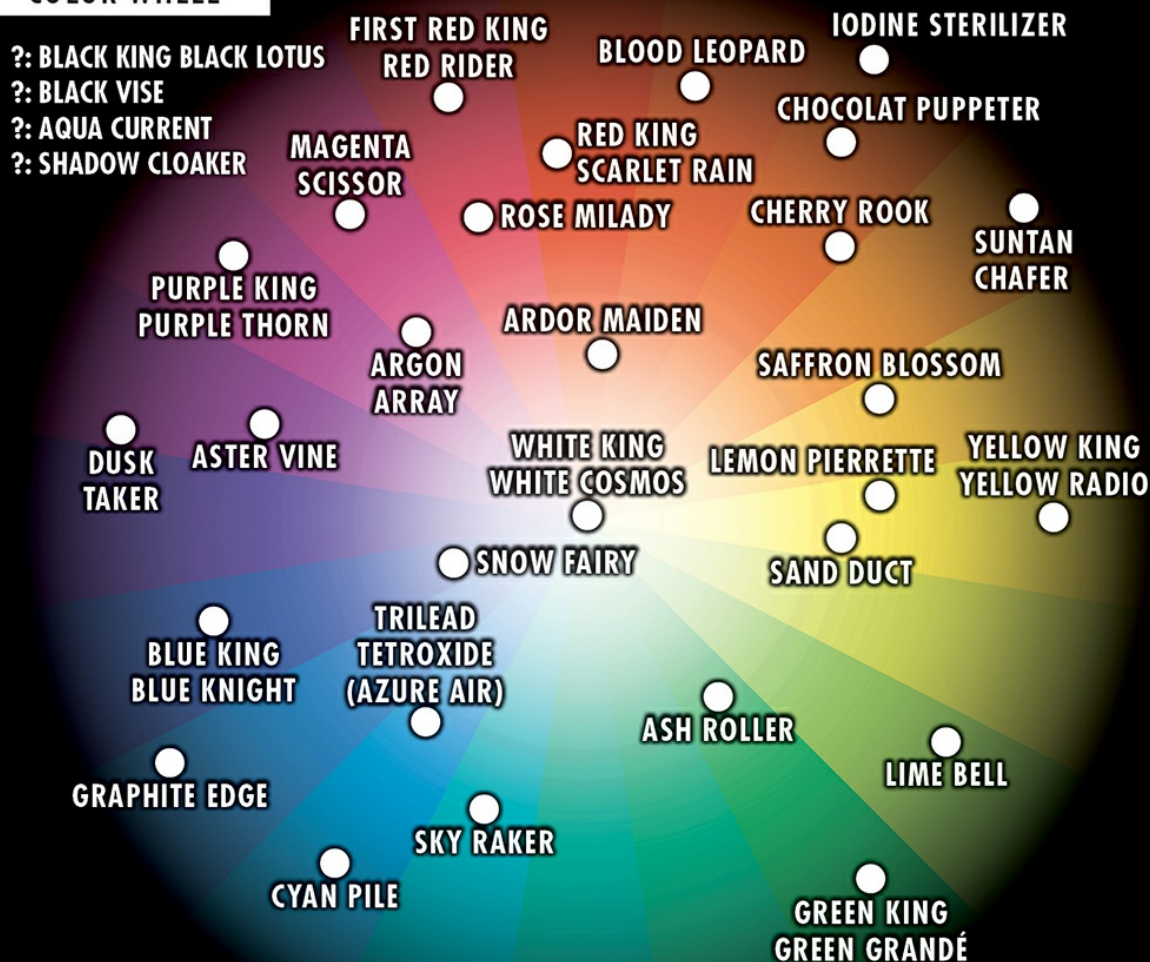
"...You're—"

HARUYUKI

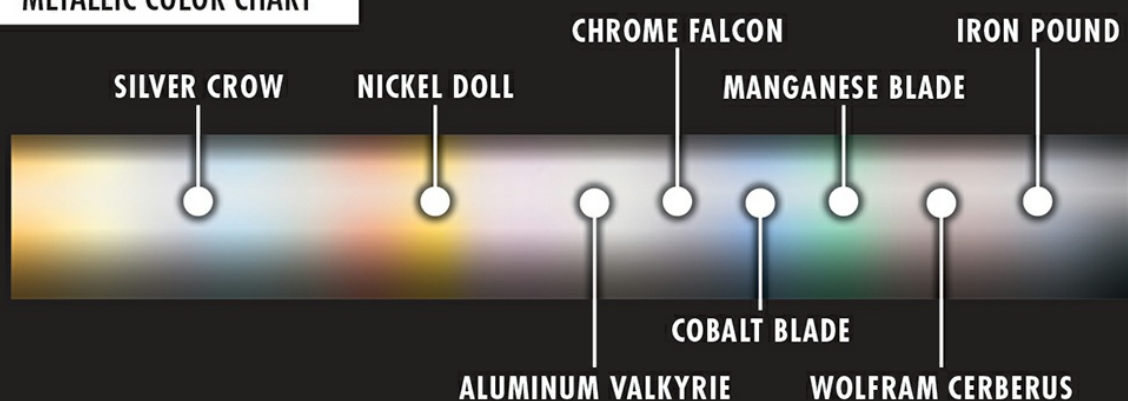
Boy in the lowest school caste. Member of the new Nega Nebulus. Possesses the sole flight ability in the Accelerated World. Duel avatar: Silver Crow.

DUEL AVATAR AFFINITIES IN BRAIN BURST

COLOR WHEEL



METALLIC COLOR CHART



The English names given to Burst Linkers always include a word associated with color. Blues indicate close-range direct attacks; reds, long-distance direct attacks; and yellows, intermediate attacks. Mid-range colors such as purple and green signify affinities that straddle two different types of attack. Meanwhile, the avatars connected to metals exhibit superior defense abilities instead of offensive power.

▶▶▶ **ACCEL • WORLD** 22

SUN GOD OF ABSOLUTE FLAME

Reki Kawahara
Illustrations: HIMA
Design: bee-pee



NEW YORK

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ACCEL WORLD, Volume 22

REKI KAWAHARA

Translation by Jocelyne Allen Cover art by HIMA

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ACCEL WORLD Vol. 22

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Edited by Dengeki Bunko

First published in Japan in 2017 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo, through Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc., Tokyo.

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First Yen On Edition: September 2020

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Kawahara, Reki, author. | HIMA (Comic book artist) illustrator. | bee-pee, designer. | Allen, Jocelyne, 1974– translator.

Title: Accel World / Reki Kawahara ; illustrations, HIMA ; design, bee-pee ; translation by Jocelyne Allen.

Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2014–

Identifiers: LCCN 2014025099 | ISBN 9780316376730 (v. 1 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316296366 (v. 2 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316296373 (v. 3 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316296380 (v. 4 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316296397 (v. 5 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316296403 (v. 6 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316358194 (v. 7 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316317610 (v. 8 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316502702 (v. 9 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316466059 (v. 10 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316466066 (v. 11 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316466073 (v. 12 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975300067 (v. 13 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975327231 (v. 14 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975327255 (v. 15 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975327279 (v. 16 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975327293 (v. 17 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975327316 (v. 18 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975332181 (v. 19 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975332716 (v. 20 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975332730 (v. 21 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975332778 (v. 22 : pbk.) Subjects: CYAC: Science fiction. | Virtual reality—Fiction. | Fantasy.

Classification: LCC PZ7.K1755Kaw 2014 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2014025099>

ISBNs: 978-1-97533277-8 (paperback) 978-1-9753-3278-5 (ebook)

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■ Kuroyukihime = Umesato Junior High School student council vice president. Trim and clever girl who has it all. Her background is shrouded in mystery. Her in-school avatar is a spangle butterfly she programmed herself. Her duel avatar is the Black King, Black Lotus (level nine).

■ Haruyuki = Haruyuki Arita. Eighth grader at Umesato Junior High School. Bullied, on the pudgy side. He's good at games, but shy. His in-school avatar is a pink pig. His duel avatar is Silver Crow (level six).

■ Chiyuri = Chiyuri Kurashima. Haruyuki's childhood friend. Meddling, energetic girl. Her in-school avatar is a silver cat. Her duel avatar is Lime Bell (level five).

■ Takumu = Takumu Mayuzumi. A boy Haruyuki and Chiyuri have known since childhood. Good at kendo. His duel avatar is Cyan Pile (level six).

■ Fuko = Fuko Kurasaki. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Rules wind. Lived as a recluse due to certain circumstances but was persuaded by Kuroyukihime and Haruyuki to come back to the battlefield. Taught Haruyuki about the Incarnate System. Her duel avatar is Sky Raker (level eight).

■ Uiui = Utai Shinomiya. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Rules fire. Fourth grader in the elementary division of Matsunogi Academy. Not only can she use the advanced curse removal command "Purify," she is also skilled at long-range attacks. Her duel avatar is Ardor Maiden (level seven).

■ Current = Formally known as Aqua Current. Real name: Akira Himi. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Rules water. Known as "The One," the bouncer who undertakes the protection of new Burst Linkers.

■ Graphite Edge = Real name: unknown. Burst Linker belonging to the old Nega Nebulus. One of the Four Elements. Their identity is still wrapped in mystery.

■ Neurolinker = A portable Internet terminal that connects with the brain via a wireless quantum connection and enhances all five senses with images, sounds, and other stimuli.

■ Brain Burst = Neurolinker application sent to Haruyuki by Kuroyukihime.

■ Duel avatar = Player's virtual self, operated when fighting in Brain Burst.

■ Legion = Groups composed of many duel avatars with the objective of expanding occupied areas and securing rights. There are seven main Legions, each led by one of the Seven Kings of Pure Color.

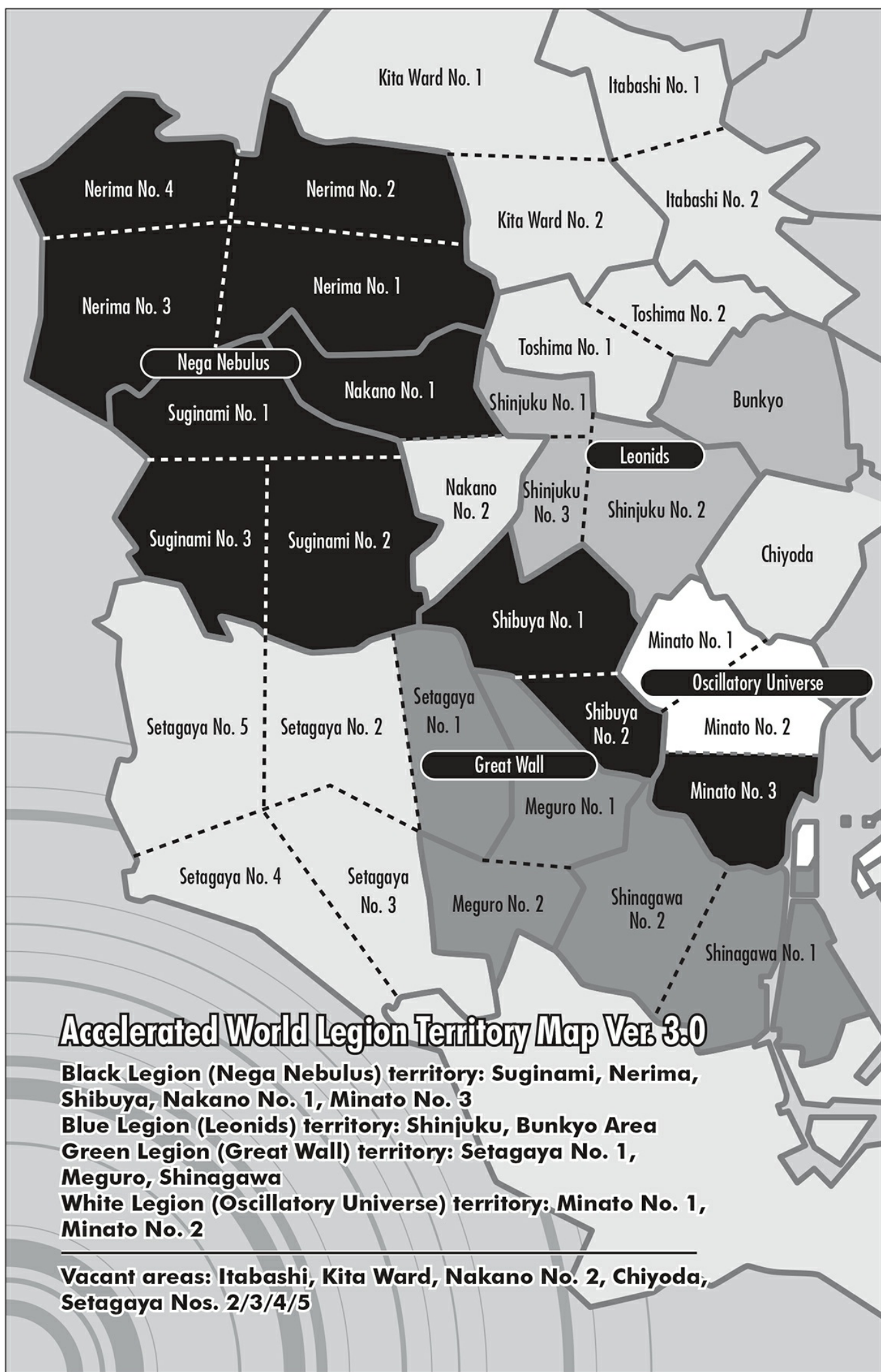
- Normal Duel Field = The field where normal Brain Burst battles (one-on-one) are carried out. Although the specs do possess elements of reality, the system is essentially on the level of an old-school fighting game.
 - Unlimited Neutral Field = Field for high-level players where only duel avatars at levels four and up are allowed. The game system is of a wholly different order than that of the Normal Duel Field, and the level of freedom in this field beats out even the next-generation VRMMO.
-

- Movement Control System = System in charge of avatar control. Normally, this system handles all avatar movement.
 - Image Control System = System in which the player creates a strong image in their mind to operate the avatar. The mechanism is very different from the normal Movement Control System, and very few players can use it. Key component of the Incarnate System.
 - Incarnate System = Technique allowing players to interfere with the Brain Burst program's Image Control System to bring about a reality outside of the game's framework. Also referred to as "overwriting" game phenomena.
-

- Acceleration Research Society = Mysterious Burst Linker group. They do not think of Brain Burst as a simple fighting game and are planning something. Black Vise and Rust Jigsaw are members.
- Armor of Catastrophe = An Enhanced Armament also called "Chrome Disaster." Equipped with this, an avatar can use powerful abilities such as Drain, which absorbs the HP of the enemy avatar, and Divination, which calculates enemy attacks in advance to evade them. However, the spirit of the wearer is polluted by Chrome Disaster, which comes to rule the wearer completely.
- Star Caster = The longsword carried by Chrome Disaster. Although it now has a sinister form, it was originally a famous and solemn sword that shone like a star, just as the name suggests.
- ISS kit = Abbreviation for "IS mode study kit." ("IS mode" is "Incarnate System mode.") The kit allows any duel avatar who uses it to make use of the Incarnate System. While using it, a red "eye" is attached to some part of the avatar, and a black aura overlay—the staple of Incarnate attacks—is emitted from the eye.

- ▶▶▶ **ACCEL • WORLD**

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“Aah, no matter how many times we do this, I always get nervous waiting like this,” Haruyuki announced to no one in particular, as his fingers wandered around his virtual desktop. His global connection was currently cut, so he figured he would distract himself with a mini-game or some other app that worked offline, but he couldn’t decide which one to launch.

“Now listen, Haruyuki.” Kuroyukihime turned a faint wry smile toward him over the headrest of the passenger seat. “We still have twenty minutes before the meeting starts. Shihoko’s much calmer than you.”

“What? No, that’s...I’m actually extremely nervous,” Shihoko Nago responded in a quiet voice from her position in the middle of the back seat to the left of Haruyuki. Maybe because her good friends Satomi Mito and Yume Yuruki weren’t there, or because of the unexpectedly large part she had to play that day, she was indeed speaking less than usual. Or so he felt.

In the Accelerated World, Shihoko—Chocolat Puppeteer—was extremely high-handed, a “spoiled rich girl” sort of avatar, and she had hurled verbal abuse at him the first time they’d met over there. But he had to say the real Shihoko was much more reserved, and he wasn’t quite comfortable with her yet. When he thought about it, though, they’d only come face-to-face on this side a mere five days ago.

When Shihoko, Satomi, and Yume had come to the student council office at Umesato, they’d all seemed fairly nervous, but when Shihoko, the smallest of them, gave her name as Chocolat Puppeteer, he’d cried out in surprise. Thinking about it now, however, when Shihoko and her friends had learned that inside the sharp and sleek Silver Crow sat the round and jiggly Haruyuki Arita, they must have been thinking “What?!” and “Get out!”

He really owed a serious debt of gratitude to the members of Nega Nebulus, who had never looked down on him after learning who he was in the real—in fact, they often hung out with him in the real world, both around town and at his house.

As if picking up on his self-torturing thoughts, Chiyuri Kurashima laughed from the other side of Shihoko. “It’s no wonder Haru’s nervous, Kuroyuki! He’s surrounded by four hot girls.”

“Mmm. I see.” Kuroyukihime nodded. “There is that, isn’t there? Haruyuki, you may be as anxious as you wish.”

Just when he was wondering how he was supposed to react to that, Fuko Kurasaki giggled in the driver’s seat.

“Perhaps we should’ve come dressed a little more summery for Corvus’s sake,” she said, clearly with a hint of sarcasm, because her thin knit top, with its wide neckline, and her tulle miniskirt were plenty summery already.

“Whoa, whoa, Fuko. Any more summery, and you’ll be a public menace.”

“Goodness. Isn’t it the duty of the Legion Master and Submaster to raise morale of the Legion members? I think you could stand to show a little more skin yourself, Sacchi.”

“A-as if we have such an obligation!”

As Haruyuki listened to them, he felt compelled to sneak a peek, but sitting behind the driver’s seat as he was, he could only see their shoulders and up. According to his predeparture memories, Kuroyukihime had been wearing a chiffon tunic with knee-length leggings, so by Haruyuki’s standards, she was probably showing enough skin...

“Sorry for not wearing anything you can get excited about, Haruuuu,” Chiyuri teased, in a singsong voice. But she was also looking quite ready for summer in a lime-green T-shirt with white jean shorts. After all this time, however, his childhood friend showing a little leg wasn’t going to send his thoughts hurtling off any cliffs, not when he’d known her as long as he could remember. Or at least, it *shouldn’t* have.

If he reacted in any way now, he would only unlock further rounds of teasing,

so Haruyuki fixed his eyes on the seat back in front of him. “Keep it together, keep it together,” he told himself quietly.

“Um. I do apologize for coming dressed like this.”

With Shihoko joining in, his eyes drifted up once more. Her “like this” was a short-sleeved gray blouse with a wide Puritan collar and a white pleated skirt—her school uniform.

“Oh, you totally don’t have to apologize, Choco. I mean, I’m in uniform, too,” he replied, wondering why he was the focus of attention here.

Shihoko cocked her head slightly to one side. “I know I didn’t have time to change clothes, but why are you in uniform, Corvus?”

“Huh? Um. I have club stuff at school after this.”

“Even though it’s the first day of summer vacation? What club are you in?”

“The Animal Care Club. We have an owl. We can’t exactly take a day off from feeding him,” Haruyuki explained, and Shihoko’s eyes grew wide.

“Wow! What kind of owl?”

“It’s a species called a northern white-faced owl.” He moved a finger and selected a number of pictures of Hoo from the image folder of his Neurolinker before sliding them to his left.

“Oh!” Shihoko squealed in delight as soon as she saw the pictures that had been sent to her own desktop. “He’s so cute! His orange eyes are super pretty. Wait. This is at Umesato, right? Why is Utai in the pictures?”

“Haru’s the president of the Animal Care Club, but Ui’s the super president!” Chiyuri interjected.

“Th-the super president...?” Shihoko had a question mark sprouting above her head.

Haruyuki explained how the Umesato club had been established to take Hoo in after the Animal Care Club at the private Matsunogi Academy, which was owned by the same company as Umesato, had been eliminated and the owl had been left with nowhere to go. How Hoo had been abused by his previous owner, and after being found in critical condition and cared for by Utai

Shinomiya, he would only eat food she gave him. And thus Utai had become a member of the Umesato Animal Care Club and came to feed him every day once school was over.

“Huh. I had no idea.” Shihoko looked at the photos of Hoo and Utai again, and then said, as if she’d only just noticed something, “Uh. But then, does that mean that when you first met Utai, you didn’t know she was a Burst Linker and one of Nega Nebulus’s Four Elements on top of that?”

“Y-yeah.” Haruyuki nodded. “And Utai Shinomiya didn’t know I was a Burst Linker, either. Or that I was Kuroyukihime’s child.”

Shihoko laughed. “So then you must have both been surprised when you found out who you were.”

“Yeah, well, mainly me, though...” Haruyuki trailed off.

“So, like, I just thought of this,” Chiyuri interjected. “But why didn’t you just say something to Haru and Ui, Kuroyuki? I mean, you’re the one who started the Animal Care Club, right? After Ui asked you, I mean.”

“Hey, whoa.” Kuroyukihime whirled around in the passenger seat. “I simply got the ball rolling at the school. And I never dreamed that Haruyuki would draw the winning number in the Animal Care Club lottery.”

“Ohh, right,” Chiyuri replied. “And I’m pretty sure it wasn’t because of the lottery that Haru ended up in the club. He actually put himself forward as a candidate, right? And by mistake on top—”

Haruyuki coughed deliberately to cut off his childhood friend. Her memory was indeed correct. He’d spaced out in class and missed whatever their teacher had said. So when his name was called, he reflexively stood up and ended up being the nominee for the Animal Care Club, without having the first clue about what was going on. That was the honest truth of the matter.

But the reason he’d spaced out in the first place was because he’d been mentally replaying the conversation he’d had the day before with Niko—Yuniko Kozuki—in his living room.

The instant his thoughts reached this point today, Niko’s hoarse voice came back to life in his ears:

“Now look, big brother Haruyuki. If one of us—or maybe both—loses Brain Burst, we’ll probably forget it all, everything we know about each other, you know?”

“So let’s promise. That when we find a name we don’t know in the address book of our Neurolinkers, before we erase the data, we’ll send one mail. And then maybe, one more time...”

At the time, Niko had been overwhelmed by the other Seven Kings of Pure Color at their eponymous meeting and afraid of total point loss. But she’d faced that fear and overcome it to continue protecting what needed protecting. Indeed, at that very moment, Niko was on standby with Blood Leopard not so far away from Haruyuki and his friends in order to go up against the most powerful presence in the Accelerated World, the bringers of far too much chaos and tragedy.

“Hey, Corvus?” Shihoko asked.

“Oh...” Haruyuki came back to himself and blinked a few times. “Wh-what?”

“Once the meeting’s over, is it okay if I stop by Umesato, too? Can I watch the owl being fed?”

“Yeah, sure. Of course,” he agreed immediately. When Hoo first came to Umesato, he’d been on guard with anyone who wasn’t Utai, but lately, he’d gotten comfortable enough that he would even eat his dinner from Haruyuki’s hand, so he probably wouldn’t get anxious if Shihoko were there.

“Yay!” A smile blossomed on her face, though Chiyuri’s eyes narrowed dangerously for some reason.

“Oh goodness, Corvus,” Fuko said from the driver’s seat, her tone light. “Exactly when did you become able to respond to a lady’s request so boldly, I wonder.”

“Nngh?! N-no, I’m not b-b-b-bold or anything...”

“My! I was complimenting you, though? As your master, I was simply pleased at the growth of my student.”

And yet, on the face in the rearview mirror, was the vacuum-shattering Raker

Smile—combined with the ultimate chill of the Kuroyukihime Smile from the passenger seat.

“Um, if you’d like, Master...a-and Kuroyukihime,” Haruyuki squeaked, shrinking far into himself, “why don’t we all go together?”

Kuroyukihime turned her face away. “Unfortunately, we’re in street clothes, so we can’t enter school grounds.”

“Aah! You’re not gonna invite me?!” Chiyuri, meanwhile, puffed her cheeks out.

“Y-you have a very important job after this, though!” he protested.

“I knooooow, but the process of inviting and refusing is important!” Chiyuri wailed.

Shihoko laughed happily, and he couldn’t see any sign of the earlier tension on her face.

If my sacrifice allows Choco to relax, then I guess this is okay... Haruyuki mumbled and grumbled in the back of his mind as he looked up at the blue sky out the window.

Sunday, July 21, 2047. In the early afternoon of the second day of summer break, the five of them had set out from Suginami Area in a yellow hatchback driven by Fuko and moved over to Chiyoda Area. Their goal was, of course, to attend the fourth meeting of the Seven Kings that was to take place at one PM.

At the last meeting of the Seven Kings exactly two weeks earlier, Nega Nebulus, the Black Legion, had proposed to the other six Legions a large-scale mission: That the seven great Legions would immediately muster their forces and attack when the Acceleration Research Society’s home area became clear. And if a Legion did not take part in the mission, they would be deemed to be conspiring with the Society and become a target for attack.

The Yellow King, Yellow Radio, had dithered and butted in, but the proposal had been adopted with the backing of the Blue King, Blue Knight.

At that point in time, Haruyuki and his friends had already confirmed that the White Legion, Oscillatory Universe, was the parent organization for the

Acceleration Research Society. But they couldn't get the kings to move with no evidence on the basis of their conviction alone. They needed to get ahold of some incontrovertible proof, but that was no easy feat.

In the end, Nega Nebulus put together a complicated mission across three stages. First, they would negotiate with Great Wall, the Green Legion, to have them agree to temporarily cede the areas of Shibuya No. 1 and No. 2. Next, immediately before the Territories on Saturday evening, the transfer of the two areas would be executed, and Nega Nebulus would attack and usurp Minato Area No. 3, the site of the White Legion base. Finally, they would have Blue Legion observers check the matching list for Minato Area No. 3 once the White Legion had lost the right to refuse challengers. If members of the Acceleration Research Society appeared on the list, it would prove they were members of the White Legion.

To be honest, this was still not actually incontrovertible evidence. At the end of the day, they would be forced to rely on nothing more than the testimony of these observers; they wouldn't be able to show any sort of physical proof in a form that would shut the mouth of even the Yellow King.

Still, they didn't have any other options. So Haruyuki and his comrades cleared one hurdle after the other, merging with the Red Legion Prominence in order to increase their battle strength, until finally, just yesterday on July 20, they carried out the final stage of their strategy.

However.

Somehow, although the Territories attack should have been a total surprise, the White King had guessed that they were coming. A mysterious Burst Linker, Orchid Oracle, had appeared out of the blue in the Territories field and transformed it into the Unlimited Neutral Field with her Incarnate technique. The seventeen members of the Nega Nebulus attacking team had very nearly been annihilated by the combined Incarnate attacks of Snow Fairy, the second seat of the Seven Dwarves (the White Legion's executive branch) and Glacier Behemoth, the seventh seat.

Having very narrowly escaped the Unlimited EK trap, Haruyuki and Chiyuri had joined up with Trilead Tetroxide, who had dived from a separate location as

their eighteenth member, and together, the three of them had crushed the first form of the Archangel Metatron in the Contrary Cathedral, the Shiba Park Underground Labyrinth, which was just barely part of the range of Oracle's Incarnate technique. En route back to the main battlefield with Metatron's newly freed true form, Haruyuki had spotted Orchid Oracle curled up on the top floor of a small tower and attempted to defeat her and her guard Rose Milady, the third seat of the Seven Dwarves.

But he hadn't been able to do it, because he had learned that Oracle was actually the Umesato Junior High student council secretary and Kuroyukihime's best friend, Megumi Wakamiya.

Megumi told Haruyuki then that she was a Burst Linker, and she was supposed to have lost all her points long, long ago, but her memories had come back to her mere hours before the start of the Territories. And that White Cosmos, the White King, had told her that if she followed her instructions, Cosmos would bring Megumi's parent, Saffron Blossom, back to life.

Haruyuki was convinced that this was a lie on the part of the White King, because it had been the White King herself who'd forced Saffron to total point loss in the distant past. But Megumi had refused to listen to Haruyuki and tried to close herself off in her shell once more.

Then they had heard *her* voice. Saffron's.

He didn't know whether it was real or an illusion. But Megumi had listened to her—"Do what you think is right, Orkki. Do what you can now for the sake of the person you love"—and returned to the battlefield, where she restored it to its original Territories field from the Unlimited Neutral Field.

With the attacking team on the verge of annihilation on the main battlefield, when the stage changed back, team leaders Kuroyukihime and Niko launched a combined counterattack with their full-powered Incarnate techniques and eliminated the defending Oscillatory team. The Territories finished in a Nega Nebulus victory, and Minato Area No. 3 finally became Black territory.

But the report they got back from Cobalt Blade and Manganese Blade, the Blue Legion's Dualis who had taken on the job of observers, stunned Haruyuki. Even after the right to refuse challenges had been stripped from the White

Legion, not a single member of the Acceleration Research Society appeared on the matching list in Minato Area No. 3.

And then, as the party grew dejected, Shihoko Nago said something utterly astonishing. Desperate, surrounded by ten Devil-class Enemies, she had decided to memorize and record her brave comrades engaged in this fierce struggle. So she had unexpectedly caught the moment on a secret replay card. The moment when Ivory Tower—the most powerful executive member of Oscillatory Universe, full proxy to the White King and fourth of the Seven Dwarves—transformed into Black Vise, the jet-black layered avatar who called himself the vice president of the Acceleration Research Society.

The replay card item could only be obtained at a shop in the Unlimited Neutral Field, and editing or processing of the video recorded on it was absolutely impossible. Thus, Shihoko's recording could be more than sufficient to serve as the concrete proof Haruyuki and his comrades had been looking for.

Black Vise had barged into the Hermes' Cord race at the beginning of June together with Rust Jigsaw, another confirmed Society member, and revealed his distinctive form to the eyes of the large Gallery gathered there. At the first meeting of the Seven Kings soon after, Kuroyukihime had announced to all assembled the names of these two avatars and the organization to which they belonged. So the other kings likely had no doubt that Black Vise was, for all intents and purposes, the ringleader of the Acceleration Research Society.

Ivory Tower would be at this fourth meeting of the Seven Kings, feigning ignorance. If they played the replay card and showed him and everyone one else at the meeting the scene where he transformed into Black Vise, this time for sure, there would be no way for him to evade the issue or argue his way out. For sure. Definitely.

While Haruyuki was certain of this, he couldn't completely erase the vague anxiety in his heart, and he wiped a sweaty palm on the pants of his uniform. When he lifted his head, he found that the happily chatting troop of girls had also fallen silent while he'd slipped down the rabbit hole of his thoughts.

Fuko stopped the car in a parking lot near an office area a little west from where they'd turned onto Uchibori Street. Unsurprisingly, given that it was

Sunday, they were the lone car in the lot. The only sound in the cabin was the faint whir of the air-conditioning and the chirping of the cicadas seeping in through the glass of the windows.

Haruyuki stared for a moment at the line of Kuroyukihime's cheek that he could see through the gap in the headrest. She seemed totally the same as always in the way she spoke and acted, but there had been a faint anxiety coloring that profile all morning. He knew the reason for that, too.

Orchid Oracle—Megumi Wakamiya. After talking with Haruyuki in the Territories the day before, she had returned the stage to the original duel field, bringing about the Nega Nebulus victory. She and Kuroyukihime had been friends since they started at Umesato Junior High, and Kuroyukihime hadn't been able to get ahold of her since the end of the duel.

Megumi had betrayed the White Legion, and Haruyuki couldn't believe that the coldhearted Black Vise—or the White King—would forgive her so easily as all that. In the worst case, they might even push Oracle to total point loss once again after bringing her back to life.

On the drive over to the Chiyoda area, Kuroyukihime had said, "Megumi's a whole lot tougher than she looks. They won't catch her so easily." But the way she said it had sounded more like she was trying to convince herself. And since Kuroyukihime still hadn't heard a peep from her via mail or voice call or anything, he could only assume something had happened to her.

If she wasn't answering her phone or mails, the only other option was to go over to her house. And Kuroyukihime was probably intently pushing back her desire to do just that. All he could do right now was wait for his Legion Master's decision.

"Your nerves are infectious, Haruyuki," Kuroyukihime muttered abruptly, and touched a finger to the small monitor embedded in the center console. Modern cars were set up to display speed, battery life, and even route navigation directly in a driver's visual field via the Neurolinker, but since not all drivers used Linkers, cars were still often equipped with physical gauges and monitors.

She turned the flashing monitor into a television screen, and instantly, cheers spilled out from the speakers at a modest volume. On the screen was a stadium

or gymnasium somewhere. A girl in a red leotard was waving a hand to the crowd that filled the spectator seats. Half of the screen switched to a replay video.

“Oh, right. Today’s the national gymnastics meet,” Chiyuri murmured.

Fuko pushed a button on the steering wheel and turned the volume up a little. The commentator’s voice rang out in the vehicle cabin.

“—was a wonderful performance. Next up, we have Risa Tsukiori in the academic artistic gymnastics division vault.”

Both screens changed to show a gymnast in a white leotard with splashes of violet, her slightly lighter black hair pulled back into a ponytail.

“Tsukiori will be doing a Produnova vault, a front handspring followed by two front somersaults. This is an extremely challenging vault with a difficulty score of 7.0, but she performed it magnificently in the preliminaries...”

As the commentator spoke, the gymnast in the white leotard loosely held up her right hand and began her approach run. Swinging her outstretched arms like whips, she ran down the runway, light on her feet like a wild animal. Unlike the previous gymnast, she didn’t do a roundoff, but rather planted hard on the springboard with both feet. And then they heard an obviously abnormal high-pitched metallic squeal over the speakers.

“Ah!”

He wasn’t sure if it was Chiyuri or Shihoko who cried out.

The gymnast lost her balance in midair and spun around diagonally twice before hitting the mat headfirst. She bounced and then fell facedown, where she stayed motionless, not so much as twitching. There was a cry of anguish from the spectators, and a woman who looked like a coach, the meet staff, and several gymnasts all raced over to the ponytailed girl on the ground. They turned her over carefully, but her eyes remained shut.

“It looks like the springboard broke,” Fuko said in a concerned voice, peering close to the screen. “I can’t believe an accident like that would happen at a national meet.”

“I hope she’s not seriously injured,” Kuroyukihime said, and Haruyuki bobbed his head in agreement.

Tring! He heard a faint echo in the core of his mind. Much more ephemeral and clear than the sound of a bell, the sound was not of the real world nor a Neurolinker notification nor even a hallucination. From the distant Accelerated World, a voice was calling his name...

“Um, Kuroyukihime?” he timidly called out to the front seat. He was worried about the injured gymnast, too, but he couldn’t exactly ignore this sound.

Kuroyukihime looked back at him. “What is it, Haruyuki?”

“I’m sorry. It’s just...,” he said. “Is it all right if I go for a second? I’ll be back before the meeting.”

“Go where? The washroom? I wonder if there’s a convenience store nearby.” Kuroyukihime moved to switch the monitor to the navigation screen, and he hurried to stop her.

“N-no, not the washroom. To the Unlimited Neutral Field...”

“What?!” Chiyuri shouted. Fuko and Shihoko also turned toward him with question marks in their eyes. “Now listen, Haru. We only got five minutes until the meeting starts. If you wanna hunt Enemies, you can do that *after*.”

“Th-that’s not it. I’m not going to hunt Enemies...Metatron called me,” he announced meekly.

“Huh?” Chiyuri blinked repeatedly, eyes wide. “Metacchi called...?”

Meanwhile, Kuroyukihime made an obviously distasteful face. “Honestly. At a time like this— No, wait.”

Then a dumbfounded look crossed both of their faces simultaneously.

“Metatron *called* you?!” Kuroyukihime shouted.

“From the Unlimited Neutral Field?! How?!” Chiyuri cried.

It was only natural they were surprised, and both Shihoko and Fuko were also staring at him with wide eyes now, but he didn’t have the time to explain. While they were sitting there like that, time was passing a thousand times faster in the

Unlimited Neutral Field.

“Uh, um. I’ll explain everything later! I’ll be back in two—no, one minute. If I’m not back by then, please pull my Neurolinker off my neck!” he yelped tongue-twister fast, and then leaned back in his seat before connecting his Neurolinker to the global net. The connected icon had no sooner flashed in his field of view than he was shouting the command.

“Unlimited Burst!”

Skreeeeeeee!!

The sound of acceleration freed Haruyuki’s mind from his physical body and sent him flying to the true Accelerated World.

A dry wind blew across the rust-colored landscape. Haruyuki stepped onto the gravelly earth with hard silver feet and looked around.

All the office buildings encircling the hourly parking area in the real world had been transformed into giant rugged rocks. He could see essentially zero plant objects, and there were no birds in the pale-yellow sky. A Wasteland stage—which vied for first or second place in the super-yawn stage rankings.

But Haruyuki didn't actually hate the Wasteland. You couldn't go inside the boulders that took the place of buildings, and there were no weird terrain gimmicks or traps, so you could just focus on your battle with your opponent. Naturally, however, he had no duel opponent now. Even so, he did a brief scan of the area and once he confirmed that there were no Enemies or duel avatars around, he closed his eyes beneath his mirrored visor.

"I'm here, Metatron."

He had previously needed nearly a minute to establish a link with the Archangel, but with just this single thought, a dot of white light appeared in the center of his dark field of view. It instantly stabilized from a blinking state and when he opened his eyelids—or more precisely, the shutters of his eye lenses—a glowing three-dimensional icon had materialized before his eyes.

"You're late!!" The icon snapped an unfortunately familiar phrase before Haruyuki could say a word, as she slapped at Silver Crow's helmet with tiny wings. "Do you realize how much time has passed since I called you, servant?"

"S-sorry. But time's a thousand times slower in the real—I mean, the Lowest Level..."

"In that case, you must simply move within .001 seconds of my call," she

sniffed.

“That’s bonkers!”

His pathetically strangled cry made him realize now was no time to be argumentative. The minute he had promised Kuroyukihime and the others was in fact sixteen hours and forty minutes in the Unlimited Neutral Field, but he really should get back right away if possible. “W-wait, wait, forget that. Um, why did you call me? If you don’t need me for anything in particular, we have a big meeting soon on the other side, so—”

Whap, whap, whap!

“Foolish creature! I am quite busy myself, so the idea that I would call you here with no particular need...I won’t say I would never do that, but this is not one of those times.”

“Huh? So then what is it?” he asked as he rubbed his head at the site of the repeated wing slaps.

But the 3-D icon didn’t immediately reply. Instead, she examined their surroundings. “This place is...Hmm, it’s not very far away at all. Remain on standby for approximately thirty seconds.”

“Huh? Th-thirty seconds?”

Not far? From where? Haruyuki wanted to ask follow-up questions, but the 3-D icon had already vanished without a sound.

Left with no other choice, he counted down the half minute as he stood in the middle of the empty lot surrounded by massive reddish rocks. He counted ten, twenty, twenty-five seconds, and then he heard a faint echo of an unfamiliar sound, like something resonating at a superhigh frequency above his head.

Gah! Enemy attack? He dropped into a ready position and looked up to see something shoot straight down from the sky above. A female avatar, two wings spread wide, silver hair rippling gracefully. There was no mistaking her—this was the second form of the Legend-class Enemy the Archangel Metatron; in other words, Metatron’s true form.

Haruyuki was frozen in place as Metatron landed silently and approached

Silver Crow's mirrored visor with a beauty that made its intense majesty felt even though her eyes remained closed.

"What do you think? I made you wait only a mere twenty-eight seconds, yes? You would do well to learn from my example and come immediately when called."

"W-wait, wait, wait! F-f-f-f-f-first..." He raised his hands unconsciously and grabbed the Archangel's slender shoulders as he interrogated her. "H-how are you in this form in the Mean Level of the Unlimited Neutral Field? We defeated your first form in the Contrary Cathedral nearly a full nine days ago in real time. You should have gone back to your first form with the Change and returned to the dungeon ages ago— Oh! Is this maybe a vision or a holographic projection or something?"

As he rambled on excitedly, he squeezed and shook Metatron's shoulders.

"S-such insolence!" The Archangel's right wing snapped to attention and she flicked Haruyuki's forehead with the tip of it. She might have intended it to be the lightest of touches, but given that this was a blow from the strongest Being in the Accelerated World outside the Four Gods, it was an order of magnitude stronger than the slaps of a 3-D icon with no battle strength to speak of.

"Hngah!" he cried out pathetically and flew backward to slam into a reddish-brown rocky pillar. That he escaped with only a 20 percent drop in his health gauge might have been due to the fact that the instant he took the wing poke, he instinctively tried to let the damage wash over him with the Way of the Flexible.

Even so, the effect of taking an incredible blow to the top of his head didn't disappear right away, and when he peeled himself off the pillar, he fell face-first onto the ground. There was probably the white light of a stun effect circling around his head.

"Goodness. You did go flying farther than I'd expected." Metatron glided over to him and, cupping her wings out to use them like hands, lifted Haruyuki up and cradled him. His depleted gauge remained that way, but the pure white phosphorescence of her wings was cozily warm.

"Unh." More or less recovered from the stun effect, Haruyuki protested

feebly, “Th-that was awful, Metatron.”

“It is your own fault for acting in such an unseemly fashion earlier.” She turned her face away from him sharply even as she continued to support him with her wings. “At any rate, you should now understand that I am not an illusion or anything of the sort.”

“Y-yeah. I understand completely. But...then how are you outside? Your first form in the Contrary Cathedral must have been restored ages ago.”

No matter how many times Enemies in the Unlimited Neutral Field were defeated, they were restored every time the Change occurred, and the Four Gods were no exception to this rule. And the interval between Changes was roughly seven days of time inside. Haruyuki and his friends had defeated her first form the previous evening, so it had already been nearly two years on this side, and countless Changes had to have occurred during that time.

Metatron nodded slightly, her eyelashes still lowered. “Yes, my first form has indeed been restored to the deepest level of the Contrary Cathedral.”

“Huh?” He stared hard at her. “So, so then don’t you have to go back in there, too?”

“I anticipated that myself...” Unusual for her, the Archangel allowed her sentence to trail away.

Now that he was thinking about it, pretty much all their conversations had been carried out via the 3-D icon or on the Highest Level where neither of them had actual bodies, so this was essentially the first time he’d had the chance to get a good look at the actual Metatron up close. Her face had the same structure as a human girl’s, but there was no whiff of humanity to her. It wasn’t that she looked polygonal or that she was too beautiful to be real, but rather that she had a divinity to her, akin to a real angel.

After talking to that tiny icon all this time, maybe I kinda forgot what Metatron’s really like...

Metatron opened her mouth once more, perhaps aware of what was in Haruyuki’s heart, perhaps not, as she stroked Silver Crow’s armor with both wings, almost tickling him. “Somehow, I...It seems that the system could not

anticipate a situation in which the first form of Metatron would be outside what you little warriors call the ‘boss room’ when the transition occurred. I had returned to my castle prior to the transition’s arrival when you previously destroyed my first form, so I did not realize it before. But it appears now that I will not be forcibly returned to the room of the first form no matter how many times the transition happens.”

“Uh. Um. So in other words.” Haruyuki tried to digest the Archangel’s relatively difficult explanation. “If the Change happens when you’re inside the Contrary Cathedral, you’re returned to the inside of your first form. But when you’re outside like this, you stay in your true form forever. Is that it?”

“I believe I said exactly the same thing,” she replied curtly, and he nodded. Indeed she had.

“B-but then why were you in your icon form when you met me last night?”

“For me, that was not last night, but 15,212 hours ago, and I was approximately one hundred kilometers away from here at that time, so flying back was simply tiresome, servant,” she replied smoothly.

“A hundred...”

So then like in Gunma? Or maybe Shizuoka? he wanted to ask, but decided against it since she probably wouldn’t know what those words meant.

After they had returned to Suginami by way of the circular bus route the previous day, the party had held a short debriefing session at the Arita house before parting ways at six PM. Once he was alone, Haruyuki had a dinner of leftover rice and vegetables together with broad bean soup, took a bath, napped for an hour, and then visited the Unlimited Neutral Field again at nine.

He didn’t go to fight; he went to keep the promise he’d made to himself immediately after the fierce battle with the White Legion that he would go and see the true form of Metatron right after the mission was over. He wanted to thank her for helping him out so many times and then really sit and talk with her. But the first words out of her mouth when she appeared as a 3-D icon before him had been, “Let us train, servant.”

But Metatron was not interested in the duel techniques of Burst Linkers. She

had only one objective: to further strengthen the link that connected her with Haruyuki. She apparently had been extremely displeased with the fact that their connection had nearly been severed by the White Legion's Snow Fairy when they encountered her on the Highest Level during the battle.

On the roof of a tall building a little ways off from his condo, Haruyuki had sat formally on his knees, eyes closed, and practiced sensing Metatron's presence. They had played hide-and-seek using the entire building, trained in conversing without using their voices, hunted Enemies, chatted endlessly, and on and on—for nearly two months of inside time, and Haruyuki had managed to achieve some modest results. Now, not only could he call her with his thoughts, he could receive something like a signal as a call from her: the faint bell that had echoed inside his brain in the car. Or more precisely, the sound of the halo that shone faintly above Metatron's vibrating head.

After finishing his long training, Haruyuki had returned to his bedroom and flopped onto his bed, determined to sleep like a log until morning. He removed his Neurolinker and closed his eyes, and three seconds later, just as his consciousness was on the verge of slipping off into the distance, he heard Metatron calling him...even though he wasn't wearing his Neurolinker.

Metatron had called out to him before in a dream, but he had been equipped with his Neurolinker. At first, he thought it was just ringing in his ears, so he ignored it, but the second and then third time he heard it, he realized it was apparently the real deal and hurried to push his Neurolinker back onto his neck. The instant he dived into the Unlimited Neutral Field, Metatron yelled at him, just as she had moments earlier: "Come as soon as I call you!"

"So you're saying that whole time you were training with me, you were a hundred kilometers away? And yet the sound of you calling me still reached the Lowest Level?"

"This 'sound of you calling' is not a very beautiful way of putting it. Hmm." She frowned. "From now on, let us call it the summons."

"S-summon..."

Sounds like my servant level went up.

He set this opinion aside for the time being, preferring to seek an answer to

his question, but Metatron raised a hand and placed it gently on his forehead.

“How many times must I tell you before you understand, servant? Our link is established through the Highest Level and distance in the Mean Level has no bearing on it. The reason the summons reaches even to the Lowest Level...Well, I don’t know the reason, either.”

For reaaaaal?

He didn’t give voice to this thought, but instead took the conversation a step back.

“So then...where have you been since you came back to Tokyo? If you go back to the cathedral, you’ll be returned to your first form with the Change. And I mean, you do rest and sleep and stuff, right? Especially now, you have to recover the strength you used up in the fight with the White Legion.”

“Your concern is unwarranted, servant.” Her tone was as curt as always, but she touched his helmet again in a gesture that was strangely gentle, and then opened up the wings cradling Silver Crow and retracted them. “We Beings have a different means of perceiving time, however slight, than you little warriors, but I do indeed require time to block off outside perceptions and decelerate my thinking. I moved away from To-ki-o for that purpose.”

“Huh.” He frowned. “O-oh, I get it. If you’re a hundred kilometers from the city, there’s basically no Burst Linkers to come attack you.”

“This way of speaking makes it sound like I was afraid and ran away, and I do not care for it. That was not my only reason for going to Fuji.”

“F-Fuji? Do you maybe mean Mount Fuji?!” Haruyuki stared, dumbfounded, at the Archangel and then looked toward the west. Not only was the sky of the Wasteland stage yellow and cloudy, countless clusters of massive rocks sprang up from the ground to block the way, so he couldn’t see the silhouette of the dormant volcano. But if they were talking about a Fuji that was a hundred kilometers away from Tokyo, that was pretty much the only option.

“S-so then when you were training with me, your true form was actually at Mount Fuji the whole time? What exactly is at Mount Fuji? Did you maybe heal your injuries there?”

But Metatron turned her face away, eyes closed, and proclaimed, “That is a secret.”

“...A-a secret?”

He had learned that it was pointless to argue when Metatron spoke to him like that, even if he was entirely baffled, so with no other choice, he let the matter drop. But in his heart he resolved to go and check what was out there one of these days, and then offered up a different question.

“But in that case, there isn’t really any place in Tokyo where you can truly relax and rest. Enemy-hunting Burst Linkers can show up anywhere, after all.”

Naturally, he didn’t think that a party with their targets set on a Wild-or Beast-class Enemy would be able to get the jump on Metatron, the most powerful of even the Legend-class Enemies, but the rule of the Accelerated World was that you never truly knew what would happen. Plus...if anyone learned that Metatron’s true form had left the Contrary Cathedral, some forces would probably try to come after her. For instance, Oscillatory Universe—whose clear victory she had overturned in the Territories the previous day.

This time, Metatron did not brush off Haruyuki’s misgivings. “Indeed, it is inconvenient that there is no place where I might securely cut off all my perceptions. If it comes to that, I have the option of borrowing a castle from one of the other Saints, but they are likely to request a strange compensation from me, and I do not wish that.”

He would have inquired further about that, but it would have taken the conversation off track once more, so he reined in his curiosity and continued, “So in other words, you just need a place where Burst Linkers would absolutely never go. The first thing that comes to mind is over there, but...” Haruyuki turned his face away from the west and toward the east.

Since the real-world car was parked in a lot in an office neighborhood, the buildings in this direction were also a succession of massive rocks, but they weren’t as dense as they were on the west side. And in between the gaps here and there, he could see the severe stone edifice along the north and south of the massive structure enshrined beyond the wall, the center of the Accelerated World occupying the central area of Chiyoda—the Castle.

“If you were inside, there’d be no one to meddle with you. And maybe somewhere far from the gates of the Four Gods, you could just hop over the wall...”

Is that a thing you could do? Before he could finish, Metatron was sighing in exasperation.

“Servant, if that were possible, it would then follow that you, too, would be able to freely come and go from Area Zero Zero.”

“Oh. I-I guess.” Shoulders slumping, he remembered the dream he’d had when he was parasitized by the first Chrome Disaster, Chrome Falcon’s memories.

Although it wasn’t quite a pure flight ability, by using his short-distance teleportation technique Flash Blink over and over, Falcon had been able to move through the air in a sort of pseudo flight, and it was with this power that he had made his way over the Castle wall. But not only did Falcon take serious damage from the ultra-gravity field around the wall even back then, the BB system sensed his “slide” and quickly blocked that way into the impenetrable fortress. Now, no matter what kind of special power a Burst Linker might have had, the instant you approached the wall anywhere other than at one of the four gates, you were yanked down into a bottomless moat where you died instantly. Apparently.

Even Sky Raker’s thrusters were basically useless, and they boasted a propulsive power greater than Haruyuki’s own silver wings, so flying over the wall was not a method that could ever be used to break into the Castle again. And the Four Saints, the most powerful of all Beings, were no exception to this rule.

“And...” Metatron turned her entire body toward the Castle. “When I entered Area Zero Zero attached to you, I had a certain thought. That the next time I came to this place, I would march in with my head held high after crushing the Four Gods as a member of Nega Nebulus.”

Haruyuki was more than a little surprised and definitely happy to hear Metatron utter the words “a member of Nega Nebulus,” but he felt like she’d start hitting him again if he said anything. So he settled for simply carving the

feelings firmly into his heart and looked toward the Castle himself.

From between a gap in the strangely shaped rocks, he could catch a glimpse, albeit a faint one, of the massive, magnificent gate built into the Castle wall. Since their current position was on the west side of the Imperial Palace, that enormous gate would have been the Hanzomon in the real world—the west gate of the Castle in the Accelerated World. This was the place where Kuroyukihime and Fuko had fought the God Byakko in the battle three years earlier that had annihilated the first Nega Nebulus.

The two of them had just barely escaped Byakko's ferocious attack with their lives, and they had safely rescued Ardor Maiden from where she was sealed away at the south gate and Aqua Current at the east gate. Graphite Edge, locked up at the north gate, had apparently escaped from the Unlimited EK under his own power at some point—albeit into the Castle.

Haruyuki and his comrades were steadily approaching one of their final objectives: attacking the Castle a second time. But it didn't actually feel real, maybe because they still had so many obstacles to clear before then. And indeed, the most important of these was settling things with the Acceleration Research Society once and for all.

Nega Nebulus would finally beat back this organization they had been fated to confront so many times and take back the thruster parts stolen from Invincible, Niko's Enhanced Armament. They would destroy the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, born from the ISS kits, and free Wolfram Cerberus, Haruyuki's friend and rival.

As long as these goals remained unachieved, neither Haruyuki nor the reformed third Nega Nebulus could make any further progress. To that end as well, they simply had to prove that the White Legion was the parent group for the Society at the meeting of the Seven Kings coming up in four minutes in real-world time.

Newly resolved all over again, Haruyuki took a deep breath, figuring that they should get back to the starting point of this conversation. "I'm excited about when I can challenge the Four Gods together with you, too. But before that, we have to settle things with the Acceleration Research Society. Of course, I'll

report back to you after the meeting that's about to start in the regular duel field—the Lowest Level. But why did you originally call—?”

Haruyuki started to ask and Metatron pressed a slender index finger to his mirrored visor.

“Before we discuss that, I would like to move elsewhere. After all your nattering about it, I wish to have a place where I can relax, which is only natural, isn't it?”

And that's supposed to be my fault?! Haruyuki thought, but it was obvious that he would only get a ready “yes” if he actually asked the question. And he would actually heave a huge sigh of relief if they could find a safe shelter for Metatron since she showed no intention of returning to the Cathedral.

“Um, uhhh...Inside of the Castle is out, the other dungeons are no good, and buildings turn into rock or ice or whatever depending on the stage and get smashed by Burst Linkers and stuff.”

As Haruyuki thought about the issue in earnest, the Archangel took a slight step back and turned her face toward the west side of the empty lot, eyes still closed.

“Do you have any thoughts on the matter, Sky Raker?”

“Hweh?!” Stunned, Haruyuki turned around, but he saw nothing except the reddish-brown pillars lined up there.

A few seconds later, however, a silver wheelchair rolled out from behind one of the stones, gravel crunching slightly beneath the tires. Seated in it, of course, was a pale blue F-type avatar clad in a snowy white hat and dress—Nega Nebulus's deputy, “Strong Arm” Sky Raker.

Her flowing metal hair fluttering in the wind, Raker/Fuko rolled her wheelchair over to Haruyuki and Metatron, a faint smile rising up on her beautiful face mask.

“How very like you, Metatron. I had intended to completely cut off my aura.”

The Archangel chuckled. “Naturally. After all, I am not presently acquiring information through my servant's eyes and ears. I realized you were hiding

there the moment you appeared.”

“I wasn’t particularly hiding...”

Her smile turned wry, and Fuko turned her madder-red eye lenses toward Haruyuki.

“Corvus fought so hard during the Territories yesterday, I thought I would give him a bit of time as a reward.”

“Th-thank you for being so thoughtful...”

Shrinking into himself, he bowed neatly and then asked anew:

“S-so why are you here, Master?”

It was unclear how long Fuko had been behind the massive rock, but unless she had chanted the command at basically the same time as Haruyuki had accelerated, she couldn’t have appeared that much earlier. It was certain, though, that she hadn’t had the time to consult with Kuroyukihime and the others, which meant that she had chased after him at her own discretion.

“Now listen, Corvus,” the sky-blue avatar replied in a faintly exasperated tone. “It’s only natural that we be suspicious when you suddenly announce that Metatron called you before you entered the Unlimited Neutral Field, isn’t it? I thought it might have been a trap set by an enemy—by the Society—so I came after you. It does appear, however, that the call was real. The two of you have grown quite close at some point, hmm?”

“N-n-n-no, that’s totally not...Um, I’m sorry for worrying you...”

“You’ll tell me in great detail later exactly through what means Metatron is able to call you in the real world, Corvus. And from now on, please explain these events properly beforehand.”

Her tone was endlessly gentle, but when the actually very scary Master Raker spoke to him like that, he could only snap to attention and readily assent.

“R-roger!”

But if Sky Raker was Haruyuki’s teacher, then Metatron was his self-professed lord and master.

“I acknowledge that Silver Crow’s explanations have been insufficient,” the Archangel suddenly interjected and shifted in a gentle motion to stand directly in front of the wheelchair. “But it was I who called him this time, so there is no fault in Crow visiting the Mean Level as quickly as possible, Sky Raker.”

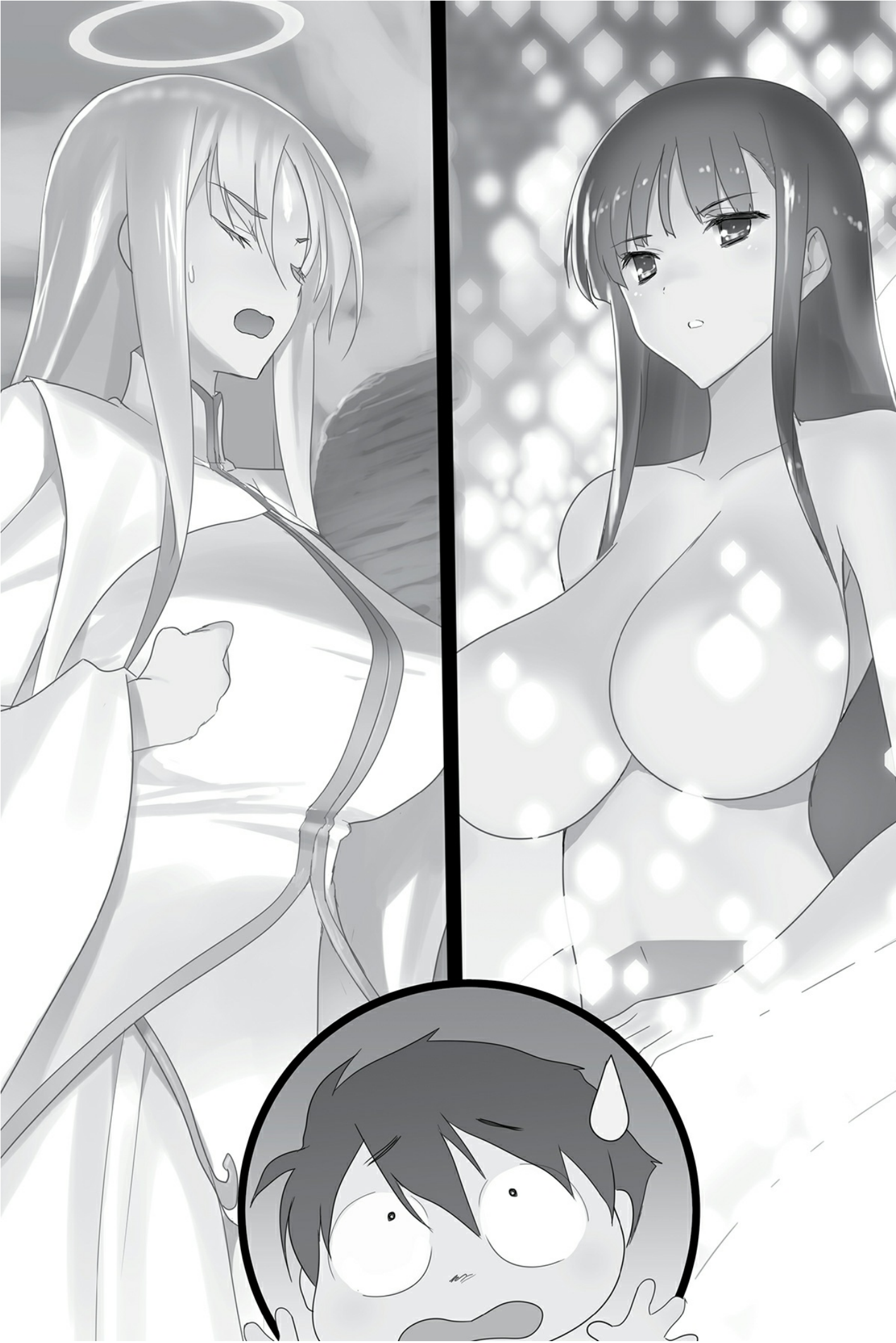
“I’m sorry, but that’s not acceptable. You’re also a member of Nega Nebulus, so I’d ask that you put our Legion ties ahead of your own personal demands, Metatron.”

Crackle, crackle.

Haruyuki could almost see the bolts of white lightning bouncing between them. Fuko and Metatron were comrades from their mission into the Castle, but that apparently didn’t mean that they had completely opened up to each other. Not by a long shot.

I have to be the cushioning here! This thought did occur to him, but on the one hand, he had the strategic arms of the Accelerated World nicknamed ICBM, while on the other, he had an eight-thousand-year-old Being, the most powerful in the Legend class, and he worried that their eyes alone on him would dig holes into his armor.

Fortunately, however, the cold war reached its détente in about three seconds.



“As for the answer to your earlier question,” Raker said in her usual gentle tone, eye lenses flashing lightly.

Haruyuki cocked his head to one side, puzzled, before he remembered. Raker had apparently overheard Haruyuki and Metatron talking about somewhere safe outside the Contrary Cathedral from behind the rock.

“Do you have any ideas?” Metatron abruptly asked.

“I don’t know if you would approve or not, Metatron, but I may actually have an idea.”

“What?! Really?!” Haruyuki cried out unconsciously, before leaning forward and continuing in a quieter voice, “Do you know a place where Enemies and Burst Linkers wouldn’t go, Master?”

A faint smile spread across Fuko’s face once again, but rather than give voice to the reason for it, she stood up from her wheelchair in a supple movement and waved Haruyuki back a few steps before raising her right hand at the yellow sky. “Equip. Gale Thruster.”

At the same time as the voice command rang out, two beams of blue light poured down from the sky and hit Fuko’s back. Enveloped in light, the hat and dress disappeared from her avatar, and the wheelchair behind her also vanished. What appeared on her back in their place was a booster Enhanced Armament with elegant, flowing lines: Sky Raker’s wings, which Haruyuki had also borrowed when he lost his own flight ability.

“I think we can probably make it, but if I run out of energy midway, please hold me, Corvus.” Smiling, Fuko ignited her booster before Metatron could even react. “Corvus. Metatron. I’ll show you the way. Please follow me.”

She kicked off the ground and shot up into the sky, wrapped in the roar of jet propulsion. Haruyuki hurriedly deployed the silver wings on his back, while next to him, Metatron also gently extended her own snowy white wings.

“Honestly. Raker similarly does not offer sufficient explanation.” Metatron lifted off, grumbling all the while, and flew up into the sky at a speed on par with Gale Thruster.

Haruyuki desperately chased after her—or at least he tried to, but in an especially pitiful moment, his special-attack gauge was completely empty. He did actually have another way to fly without using his gauge or his Incarnate technique, but he had decided he would rely on Metatron’s borrowed wings only when he had completely exhausted his own resources and had no other choice—or he would try to do that anyway.

With no other option, he turned to the sky and shouted, “I’m sorry; please give me ten seconds!”

He clenched his right hand into a fist. There were no easy target objects to replenish a special-attack gauge in the Wasteland stage, so he would just have to destroy the massive rocks standing like a grove of trees around him. But while these weren’t indestructible like they would have been in the Demon City stage, they were relatively hard nonetheless. To do the maximum destruction in the shortest period of time, you would need an Enhanced Armament or a special ability if you weren’t a type specializing in fairly close-range attacks.

But Haruyuki set his sights on a nearby rock and kicked at the ground with everything he had, before launching a right straight punch with little flash to it. He had added one small trick, however: He’d affixed the image of a sturdy shaft piercing the rock from his fist to his elbow and up his shoulder to the core of his being. Tiny sparks flew from his every joint at the moment of impact, but Silver Crow—slender for a fighting type—gouged deep into the reddish-brown rock with his right arm, and the whole thing shattered with a resounding *boom*.

The polar opposite of the Way of the Flexible that Kuroyukihime had taught him, the Way of the Stiff transformed his avatar into a lump of steel for just an instant. He had learned the technique from fighting the superhard metal color Wolfram Cerberus and used it to pierce tough armor and structures.

He followed the right punch with a left and then a kick from each leg to destroy four massive rocks in succession. Within ten seconds, just as he’d said, Haruyuki had charged his special-attack gauge up to 50 percent, so he once again deployed his silver wings and ascended at maximum speed, hurrying to where Fuko and Metatron were waiting about a hundred meters up.

He’d been worried that Gale Thruster’s energy would end up significantly

depleted while he kept them waiting, but once he caught up, he saw that Fuko had stopped the jet propulsion and that Metatron was supporting her avatar with one hand.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you wait!” He wanted to add something about how they looked quite chummy to his apology, but that would likely be stirring up a hornet’s nest, so he held his tongue.

“Listen, Corvus.” Fuko snapped her index finger out at him. “When you enter the Unlimited Neutral Field—”

“No matter what else, ensure your special-attack gauge is full,” Haruyuki finished, dejected. “I’ll be careful from now on.”

Metatron shook her head from side to side in exasperation. “You require the gauge or what have you to fly and such nonsense. You little warriors really are a bother.”

“Uh, um...It’s seriously superhard for little warriors—I mean, Burst Linkers, to fly, you know!” he replied, hovering, and watched his special-attack gauge inch its way toward empty.

Fortunately, Metatron did not try to drag the conversation out any further, but instead turned her gaze back to Fuko. “Well then, Raker, I’d ask that you now guide us.”

“Roger. Thanks for holding me aloft, Metatron.” Released from the Archangel, Fuko ignited her booster once more. “This way,” she said and started to fly south in the sky above Uchibori Boulevard, so Haruyuki and Metatron chased after her on their own wings.

Fuko went south for about five hundred meters along the Castle moat and then when they had flown over a rocky mountain as majestic as Australia’s Uluru—most likely the National Diet Building in the real world—she turned slightly to the east. There were no area boundaries in the Unlimited Neutral Field, and when they went over a broad ravine that was likely Sotobori Boulevard, Minato Area No. 1 lay ahead.

In the Territories the previous day, Minato Area No. 3 to the south had become the territory of Nega Nebulus, but Nos. 1 and 2 were still under the

control of Oscillatory Universe. That said, he didn't imagine they would run into any White members in the Unlimited Neutral Field now, but even so, he was fully on guard as he chased after Fuko's blue jet flames.

Eventually, a mountain appeared up before them, about 250 meters high and shaped like the top had been lobbed off diagonally—Toranomom Hills Tower, developed in the 2010s. Even in the present in 2047, it was still one of the top twenty tallest buildings in Tokyo, and looking up at its majesty, Haruyuki wondered if this wasn't perhaps where Fuko was taking them.

After all, the top of a mountain of that height would have been unreachable to all but those duel avatars with some kind of ability to run up walls, but that was at best only here in the Wasteland stage. In the Purgatory or Steel stages, you could go inside buildings and the elevators might even be functioning, so anyone could easily make it to the highest level. And on top of that, the roof was on a sharp diagonal, so even an Archangel would have a hard time living there.

Fuko quickly dispelled Haruyuki's concerns. Although she did approach Toranomom Hills, she flew right past it to head farther south.

New mountains—likely tower condos in the real world—appeared one after the other, but it seemed that none of these was their ultimate destination. It had already been more than three minutes since they'd taken off from the west side of the Castle, so even though they were in economy mode at sixty kilometers per hour, Haruyuki began to worry that Gale Thruster's energy was about to run out.

Just then, his field of view—which was obstructed by the clusters of condos—opened up all at once to reveal a basin covered in green. Although it was only cacti and other succulent plants, it was quite rare in the Wasteland stage. From the location, he assumed it was Shiba Park in the real world—under which lay Metatron's domain, the Contrary Cathedral.

Fuko couldn't possibly have been planning to return Metatron to her labyrinth, could she? If the Change occurred while she was in there, Metatron would be locked up in her first form and only able to appear in the outside world in her 3-D icon form.

Haruyuki was about to call out to Sky Raker up ahead to check what exactly she had in mind. But before he could, Metatron fell back to fly by his side.

“It appears that Raker is not moving toward my castle,” she said.

“Huh? Then where...?” Blinking rapidly, Haruyuki shifted his gaze from Shiba Park off to the right. Instantly, he realized that a strangely shaped mountain was rising up directly ahead of them, much taller than Toranomom Hills and far thinner. The silhouette was more like a tower than a building, and he had seen it before.

Back at the start of the first term of the school year, when Haruyuki had had his silver wings stolen by the marauder Dusk Taker, he had visited this place with the guidance of Ash Roller. Then, too, the Unlimited Neutral Field had been a Wasteland stage. He and Ash had ridden the motorcycle and raced up the vertical rock face, over three hundred meters, and Haruyuki had met *her* there for the first time: Sky Raker, Strato-Shooter, one of the Four Elements, a woman who had achieved an august return to Nega Nebulus and who had taught Haruyuki about the Incarnate system.

This was the old Tokyo Tower. And at its peak it was the player home where Raker had hidden away from the world for more than two years—Fufuan.

Haruyuki held his breath and looked up at the tapered tower while ahead of him, the light of Gale Thruster’s jets began to flicker irregularly. It had finally run out of energy.

Fuko spread out her arms to glide and Haruyuki and Metatron came around to either side to each grab hold of an arm.

Fuko looked to each of them in turn and then asked gently, “I don’t suppose you could carry me to the top of that tower?”

“I suppose we could,” Metatron deigned.

“Of course!” Haruyuki shouted.

With that, each flapped their respective wings forcefully.

In order to teach the Incarnate System to Haruyuki, whom she had only just met at the time, Fuko had mercilessly pushed him off the top of that tower.

Having lost his wings, Haruyuki had to climb the tower with just his hands and feet, a task that took him seven days. During that time, Fuko had continued to wait for his arrival and dropped packages every day with food and notes containing hints.

Back then, once he understood how to use the Incarnate System, he had only been able to make a sword of light stretch out mere centimeters from his fingertips, but now he was able to use it freely as the Incarnate techniques Laser Sword and Laser Lance. He could even produce second-stage applications Laser Javelin and Light Speed, but naturally, he was still a long way from mastering the ultimate Incarnate. This ultimate technique arena was a third stage of Incarnate techniques, bringing about an overwrite of a higher dimension “through absolutism,” which Graphite Edge—the master of Trilead, a man he’d met in the Castle and a former member of the Four Elements—had told him about. However, the one who had first set him on the endless road of Incarnate was the very Fuko who was now entrusting Haruyuki with her body.

The Incarnate System had the two aspects of light and dark. If a Burst Linker kept using a fourth-quadrant destructive Incarnate, they would be swallowed up by a hole inside themselves. The negativity they felt toward themselves and others would increase without limit, and their personality would become twisted; all that lay ahead after that was carnage, an intense desire for nothing but destruction.

Even still, Haruyuki wanted to believe in the possibilities of the Incarnate System. It was precisely because he had this power that he’d been able to retrieve the wings that Dusk Taker had stolen from him, and he’d also been able to bring back Metatron when she was on the verge of annihilation. When he finally managed to reach the third stage of Incarnate, he felt like the truth about this world that Metatron and Kuroyukihime sought would finally be within reach.

“Master?”

“What?” Fuko turned her gaze on him, and Haruyuki realized that he had called her without any particular reason for doing so.

“Oh! Um, no, it’s, uhhh...”

But at just that moment, they reached an altitude of 333 meters and the peak of the rocky mountain came into view.

“Oh-ho!” Metatron sounded impressed as she held Fuko’s arm. “I’d realized that there was a portal at the top of this tower, but that’s not all that’s here, hmm?”

“Hee-hee-hee!” Fuko giggled. “It’s quite wonderful, isn’t it?”

Holding her tightly, Haruyuki and Metatron stopped ascending and moved horizontally to land gently on the edge of the top of the old Tokyo Tower.

In real time, it had been about twenty days since he’d visited this place, just before the Umesato Junior High School festival. That had been immediately after they’d challenged the God Seiryu to rescue Aqua Current from her sealed state, so he hadn’t had the luxury of enjoying the view. But when he looked at it now, he felt like it was even more beautiful than he remembered.

Even though they were in a Wasteland stage, the circular field, about twenty meters around, was covered in verdant lawn with a small pond in the center boasting a pure, clear water. Farther in was an elliptical blue light shimmering like a mirage—a portal that exited to the real world, also known as a leave point. Sweet flowering plants blossomed around the pond, and colorful butterflies fluttered around those.

Haruyuki wordlessly took in the sight, the true embodiment of a floating garden, when he heard the slightly skeptical voice of the Archangel.

“It is indeed a lovely view, but in terms of height, other places are actually higher up.”

“It’s not about the height alone, of course, Tron,” Fuko said, and quickly flicked through her Instruct menu to materialize an item as an object: a small key, gleaming with silver light. With this in hand, she walked toward the central pond. Haruyuki urged Metatron to follow her.

When they had walked about five meters from the edge of the garden, they heard the faint playing of a trumpet. Countless points of light popped into existence on the opposite side of the pond and coalesced into a cottage.

“Oh-ho! This is what you all call a ‘player home,’ yes?” Metatron’s voice held

a note of astonishment, albeit ever so slight.

The cottage was small, but the dark green sloped roof, the white walls, and the bright brown door all came together to produce an image like something straight out of a picture book.

Fuko went around the pond and stepped up to the cottage, and the door automatically unlocked. “All right. Both of you, please come inside.”

Fuko prepared both a tea with a mysterious fragrance and a cake with a mysterious fruit for them. Immediately after polishing the meal off, Haruyuki looked around the cottage once again.

It only had one room, but this felt much larger than it had looked from outside. A small kitchen occupied one corner, and the rest of the space was taken up with a table for four, a bed, and a chest. Orange flames flickered pleasantly—and likely constantly—in the cute fireplace built into the wall.

After the annihilation of the first Nega Nebulus at the Castle, Sky Raker had lived in retirement in this cottage for two years until she met Haruyuki. Naturally, she hadn’t been on a continuous dive into the Unlimited Neutral Field that whole time; instead, she had used a disconnection timer and fixed her log-in position. So in a certain sense, she had basically sealed her avatar off at the top of the tower.

When he first saw this room three months earlier, Haruyuki had felt a hazy sadness in the air, but now all he felt was a comfortable warmth. Perhaps feeling similarly, Metatron started to speak in an unusually relaxed tone, finishing her cake soon after he did.

“That this room is far more cramped than my domain goes without saying... However, it is surprisingly not so unpleasant.”

“I’m so happy you like it,” Fuko replied with a slight grin, and opened her Instruct menu once again. She materialized a silver key essentially identical to the one she used before. With a *klak*, she placed it on the table. “All right. I’ll give this to you then, Metatron.”

“What?” Haruyuki cried out. “Wh-what do you mean?”

“I don’t *mean* anything.” Fuko sounded exasperated. “This is what we were

talking about right from the start, isn't it?"

Haruyuki finally remembered what was actually going on. In the empty lot on the west side of the Castle, he and Metatron had been talking about finding a safe shelter in the Unlimited Neutral Field when Fuko appeared and said she had an idea before leading them to Fufuan. All of which meant...

"Huh?! So, so then, you're going to let her borrow this house?!"

"Think less borrowing and more joint management." Fuko nodded. "She can stay as long as she wants; I don't mind at all."

"B-but if you give Metatron the key, you..."

As he'd witnessed earlier, a player home was immaterial when the person in possession of the key was away from it, and no one else could interfere with it. Moreover, the old Tokyo Tower had completed its role as a tourist attraction—even the elevator no longer worked—so it was impossible to reach the peak no matter what the stage attribute, making it an ideal place for a shelter within the Unlimited Neutral Field. But put another way, this meant that when Metatron was in possession of the key, Fuko would no longer be able to use the house.

However.

"There's no issue, though?" Fuko commented smoothly, and pulled a second—no, to be more precise, the first key out from somewhere on her avatar and set it down next to the key she'd placed there a few seconds earlier.

"Whaaat?!" Haruyuki was stunned. "Two keys?! D-did you make a copy somewhere?"

"As impressive as the Unlimited Neutral Field is, it does not have a locksmith," Fuko noted. "Actually, I feel like making a copy of a player home key would create all sorts of problems."

"S-so then, what...?"

"Accelerated World player homes always come with two keys. There are many theories as to why. Maybe one is for keeping in your Instruct menu and the other in your home storage...Or maybe for shared control with a partner."

Haruyuki nodded in understanding. In the real world, house keys were

generally electronic types with Neurolinker authentication, but keys in the Accelerated World were physical items. In which case, it was only natural to want a spare, and there might be times when an avatar wanted to share the home with another person. Fuko was saying that she would keep one of the keys and entrust Metatron with the other.

But the Archangel didn't move to take the key on the table. Instead, she stared at Fuko, her eyes still closed. "Are you fully aware of what you're doing, Raker? If you entrust a presence like myself with your house key, anything might happen because of it. In the course of events, my first form might even come to stay in this garden."

"Eeah!" Once more, it was Haruyuki who reacted.

If Metatron's first form, the divine beast that burned up anything and everything that lived with its super-large laser Trisagion, took over the garden in the sky and worse, was removed from the control of Metatron's true form, no one—not even Fuko and her key—would ever be able to approach the small cottage again.

But Sky Raker's smile remained firmly in place. "We'll deal with that when it happens, Tron. You're a member of Nega Nebulus, and if you are in trouble because you don't have a safe place to go, then it's only natural that I would do this much for you as your comrade. And Fufuan is right by Shiba Park and your castle, so perhaps you can feel more at home here?"

"....."

Unusually for Metatron, she was silent for more than five seconds before nodding slightly. "I do not have this ill-defined parameter of 'feeling,' but if you are willing to do this much for me, then I will gratefully accept."

She reached out and took one of the keys lined up on the table. The key shone with a pale white light, rose up gently, and was absorbed into Metatron's palm.

Fuko grabbed the remaining key and stored it in her own Instruct menu. "I don't come here very often anymore, so feel free to use the house as you please. It does shake a little in the Storm stage, though."

A bright smile spreading across her lips, she brought her hands together above the table and continued in a different tone.

“Now. Corvus, what exactly was the reason Metatron called you, then?”

With the conversational ball suddenly tossed in his direction, Haruyuki blinked rapidly beneath his mirrored goggles. “That’s, because...To see if there wasn’t a safe shelter for Metatron...”

The Metatron in question sitting to his right let out an exasperated sigh. And finally, Haruyuki himself also remembered the correct sequence of events.

The reason they’d started talking about a shelter was because Metatron had materialized in her true form in the vacant lot of the west side of the Castle. And the reason for that had been to explain the reason she had called Haruyuki. And that explanation hadn’t actually happened yet.

“Um, I’m sorry, she hasn’t told me,” he said, scratching his helmet.

Now Fuko shrugged. “I thought as much. Well then, let’s get into the issue at hand. Metatron, in the real world—the Lowest Level—we are currently about to attend a very important meeting to decide what happens next in the battle against the Acceleration Research Society and the White Legion. Corvus will no doubt be asked for key testimony, so if it is not a matter of some urgency, I’d prefer it if he focused on the meeting right now.”

Fuko didn’t so much as flinch in the face of the true form of one of the Four Saints—the most powerful Beings in the Accelerated World after the Four Gods. But they couldn’t leave the Castle, and Metatron was right here.

Haruyuki, however, unconsciously shrank into himself, though Metatron seemed to take no offense. In fact, she hung her head ever so slightly, eyes still closed, as though in apology.

“I understand that something important will occur soon for Nega Nebulus in the Lowest Level. And normally, I would rest myself in some place or other to await my servant’s report. But...I received a request I cannot easily refuse from a sworn friend. And an urgent one at that.”

“Sworn friend?” Haruyuki exchanged a glance with Fuko. Although Metatron possessed an intelligence essentially on par with or greater than that of a

human being, when all was said and done, she existed as a CPU character in a fighting game. Who on earth was this “friend”?

Wait. I’ve heard that expression before. And not in the real world, but somewhere in the Accelerated World. Not from a Burst Linker, either. From someone else...

“Is this friend of yours a dangerous presence?” Fuko asked Metatron, before Haruyuki could succeed in unearthing the memory.

“That would depend on the definition of the word *dangerous*,” the Archangel replied. “I shall guarantee that she will not act in such a manner as to deplete your health gauges or steal your Burst Points. But I also cannot anticipate what she intends to discuss. There is a possibility that it may cause a shock to your logic circuits.”

Haruyuki felt a slight shiver of fear, wondering what this “friend” could possibly have to tell them, but Fuko smiled.

“If it means that we will be treated to a tale that surprising, then I actually look forward to it. Where should we go to meet this friend of yours?”

“There is no need to move,” Metatron said slowly. “In the Mean Level, that is. The discussion will take place in a location you wished to see, Sky Raker.”

“I see. The famed Highest Level, hmm?”

The exchange brought up a memory from three days earlier. To get information on the final Arc—The Fluctuating Light—Haruyuki, Fuko, and Metatron had broken into the Castle through the Suzaku gate and had happened upon the young samurai Trilead Tetroxide and his master/parent, Graphite Edge. During their conversation, Fuko had asked Metatron if she could see the Highest Level, too, and Metatron had asked if she wanted to give it a try, but then Graph interjected and they hadn’t actually gone anywhere.

“I know I asked you this in the Castle, but it’s not somewhere one can easily go, is it?” Fuko said.

“If you were attempting to do so as an individual, even you would require effort in the unit of years in the Mean Level,” Metatron sniffed. “But it is possible as long as you can align with myself and my servant. If you cannot,

well, we will communicate the details of the conversation.”

“When you put it like that, right or wrong, I’d like to try. But...Corvus is one thing. It seems like it would be difficult to align with you, though, Tron.” Shrugging once again, Fuko spread out her hands on the table. “So? What do I have to do to align?”

“The act itself is simple. You simply do this.” Metatron grabbed Fuko’s hand. And then she reached out with her other hand to Haruyuki at her side. Sucked in, he gripped this hand and took Fuko’s free hand with his own.

They formed a triangle at Metatron’s urging, but now that Haruyuki thought about it, he had only visited the Highest Level twice himself. And the first time had been in the middle of that intense battle with the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, while the second time had been immediately after they’d gotten dragged into Orchid Oracle’s large-scale Incarnate technique. He had no experience shifting in a peaceful moment like this.

What on earth am I supposed to do now that we’re holding hands? He started to get nervous.

“No need to fret,” the Archangel instructed. “Interrupt your visual input and sense the flow of light that connects you and me with Raker.”

He closed his eye lenses and turned his focus to his hands. Even through the metal armor that covered the palms of his duel avatar, he could feel the warmth and softness of the hands of Metatron and Sky Raker. This sensory information became a hazy light that flowed back and forth between the three of them.

There had been just one other time when Haruyuki tried to reach the Highest Level on his own. He had been guided by a mysterious voice and tried to revive the Archangel’s core, which still remained on the Highest Level after she’d vanished, protecting Haruyuki from the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II’s attack.



At the time, the link with Metatron was on the verge of being severed, so it had been like trying to grab hold of a star flickering in the distant night sky. But now they were holding hands tightly. He could clearly feel the pulse of the higher-order link that he and Metatron had gradually strengthened over a period of time that included his two months of training the previous evening.

“Master, please follow me.” He spoke this thought at Fuko and heard her voice in reply in his mind.

“Yes, anytime.”

“Here we go.” He aligned his consciousness with the link with Metatron, jumped on the wave of light, aimed for the heights of the Accelerated World... and flew.

Skreeeeee!!

With the shrill sound of reacceleration, the hardness of the chair, the aroma of the tea, and even the mass of his duel avatar itself vanished. When he opened his eyes again, they were no longer inside the cozy cottage.

Well, the spatial address itself hadn’t changed. But the world had been plunged into darkness, and the three-dimensional structures of the home, its furnishings, and the old Tokyo Tower were depicted as minuscule points of light. The blue glow pulsing immediately next to them was the portal. On the ground a distant 333 meters below, countless glimmers shone and flashed, depicting something like the Milky Way itself. They were all what Metatron called “nodes”—the social cameras of the real world.

“...So this is the Highest Level,” a voice murmured.

He lifted his head and saw Fuko standing next to him. Fortunately—he supposed—she was not naked in her physical body, but in the form of Sky Raker. But just like the house, her outline was drawn in particles of white light and she was semitransparent. Haruyuki was similarly depicted in the form of Silver Crow.

“It’s beautiful,” she sighed. *“Almost like a sea of stars. I wish we could’ve brought Sacchi. It was like this with the Castle, too. I keep seeing all these things before she does...”*

“Yes. But...” Haruyuki nodded and then shook his head. “I think Kuroyukihime would say she doesn’t want someone to bring her; she wants to come to these places under her own power. I just know that someday, she’ll break through the guard of the Four Gods, open the gates, and march into the Castle with her head held high.”

“Hee-hee! I guess so. And so then...” She looked around their surroundings, her mane of light swinging. “I wonder where Tron went?”

“Huh?” Haruyuki whirled his head around, but there was no sign of Metatron anywhere. They couldn’t possibly have left her in the Mean Level?

“Of course you did not, servant.”

Together with this sudden rebuke, he felt a whap on his helmet and Haruyuki looked up. Metatron was descending to land softly behind him, folding her large wings once more.

“I will tell you this right now. The reason you and Raker are able to shift to this level is because I am here. Since the founding of BB 2039, no little warrior has reached the Highest Level through their own power...ostensibly.”

“I—I know...,” he answered, but added in his heart, *But Kuroyukihime will definitely make it here someday.* “So then where’s your friend, Metatron?”

“She has already arrived.”

The words weren’t even out of Metatron’s mouth before a small dot of light appeared next to her. The regular blinking quickly turned into a steady shine and expanded soundlessly to produce a thin disc about ten centimeters around—although in this space, that was merely Haruyuki’s subjective measurement. The disc appeared to have no thickness at all, and another extremely thin ring appeared around it, with ten lines like needles stretched out, intersecting the disc. The word *sun* popped up in the back of Haruyuki’s mind, and then suddenly, the disc assumed the shape of a forehead and carved out a human figure.

A girl. She was a little shorter than Metatron, but her costume, reminiscent of ancient Japan, had real volume to it. Her gentle beauty was also Japanese, and her straight hair fell all the way to her feet. He felt it was fairly lifelike for a duel

avatar, but he couldn't pick up the actual texture or feel of it in the Highest Level where everything was depicted in particles of light.

Even though she had her eyes closed, like Metatron next to her, when she caught Haruyuki with her gaze, he felt a fathomless pressure. And then the F-type avatar gently raised an arm to materialize a large hand fan out of nowhere and hid her mouth with it.

"We finally meet, Silver Crow." Her voice was graceful and refined.

"Hwa?" After a relatively pathetic first utterance, Haruyuki asked ever so timidly, "Um...Do you know me?"

"Naturally. This may be the first time we have faced each other like this, but we have exchanged words."

"Uhhh...Um..."

The only Japanese-style duel avatars Haruyuki knew were Ardor Maiden, Trilead Tetroxide, and the assassin ninja Shadow Cloaker from the White Legion, with whom he had fought the previous day. He had absolutely no recollection of an avatar like this, more reminiscent of a queen from the age of the gods than of a shrine maiden. Her courtly phrasing was similar to the mysterious voice that had given him advice on sword techniques when he fought Glacier Behemoth in the Territories, but the tone was completely different.

Wait.

He had no memory of the form, but he did feel like he'd heard the silky-smooth mezzo-soprano voice somewhere before. Not in the normal duel field or in the Territories. No—in the Unlimited Neutral Field. And not in a normal time, but in some kind of extreme situation...

When Haruyuki had cocked his head as far as it could possibly go to one side, Fuko brought her face in close and whispered, "Corvus, this person is probably —"

But before he heard what came next, his brain made the connection, albeit ever so faintly. "Oh! Are you maybe from that time?! You're the person who told me that there was still hope when I thought Metatron was going to

disappear!”

Unconsciously, he took a step forward and then another. He was about to clasp the fan-holding hand of the avatar with both of his own to express the gratitude welling up inside him. And then he froze in his tracks.

The F-type avatar before him had said then that she was Metatron’s sworn friend. And Metatron had said the same thing just now. That she wanted Haruyuki to meet her “sworn friend.” The Archangel had never treated Haruyuki as anything but a servant; she would never call a little warrior a sworn friend even if they were a powerful King-class soldier. Which meant that this woman was not a Burst Linker, but rather...

His hands, frozen a mere five millimeters from the woman’s right hand, slowly opened up and inched backward. “Um, are you maybe the same as Metatron?”

“If you had gone on and touched us, we would have slapped you in the place where you stood.” The fan hiding her mouth snapped shut, and the woman announced her name, her bearing the height of self-possession. “We are one pillar of the Four Saints, the Being Amaterasu, enshrined at Amano Iwato—what you would call the Tokyo Station Underground Labyrinth.”

I knew iiiiiit!! Haruyuki very nearly screamed and dashed back, but forced himself to keep it together.

When he’d gone to help Metatron on the verge of extinction, the owner of the mysterious voice guiding him had indeed given her name as something, something-terasu. He hadn’t managed to catch the whole thing, but now it was clear that it had been Amaterasu, the most powerful of all Enemies as a Legend-class Being, with the motif of the mythological Japanese sun god. It made sense that Metatron would call someone like this a sworn friend.

Shuddering at the fear that belatedly rose up within him, Haruyuki started to thank her for helping him. “I-it was you who spoke to me then, right, Ama—Miss Amaterasu? Um, thank you so much. Because of you, I was able to help Metatron—”



“Servant?” Metatron cut in abruptly, breaking her long silence.

He started and turned his face to look at her. “Wh-what?”

“You don’t give me any titles at all, and yet you offer Amaterasu a title of honor?” the Archangel said unexpectedly, furrowing her slender brow ever so slightly.

“*Gulp!* I—I mean, it’s just, I’m only meeting Miss Amaterasu for the first time and all,” Haruyuki responded.

The sun goddess spread her fan once more and spoke in the same languid tone as before. “Although we personally would prefer ‘my lord Amaterasu,’ if Metatron accepts a lack of title, then we, too, shall follow her example.”

“Th-thank you.” Haruyuki ducked his head in a bow and then had a sudden realization. “Actually, please wait a moment. When you called out to me before, Amaterasu, I don’t remember you speaking so formally.”

If his memory was true, the voice he’d heard then had been extremely unadorned and hadn’t used the royal “we” but rather a normal “I.”

Amaterasu brought her fan up around her nose awkwardly—or maybe it just looked that way to him. “At that time, the link via Metatron was on the verge of being severed. We sought to minimize the amount of information to be transmitted. This is our true self.”

“Um...uh-huh.”

Well, she is Metatron’s friend at any rate. She seems like she’s got her own quirks, too.

Perhaps picking up on Haruyuki’s thoughts, Amaterasu snapped her fan shut with some force once more. “Hear me, Silver Crow. Though we may permit the omission of our titles, you must never forget to maintain a worshipful attitude toward us. If you would thank us, this should not be carried out in the Highest Level. Rather, you must be conscientious and make your way to our shrine. Naturally, you must not forget an offering.”

“R-right...Definitely, soon,” he promised, and then realized that meant he might be attacked by Amaterasu’s first form if he dived into the Tokyo Station

Underground Labyrinth in the Unlimited Neutral Field, but it was too late. In his heart, he added a caveat that he would go when he was level seven—no, level eight—and then glanced over at Metatron. “Um, Metatron. So you called me to introduce me to Amaterasu? Oh, of course, I’m glad to be here, but why now?”

“Your memory capacity is as low as ever, servant. I believe I told you I called you because I received an urgent request from my friend Amaterasu.”

“Oh...R-right.” He shifted his gaze once more from the Archangel back to the sun god. “Um, so did you have an urgent errand for me?”

“We would not engage in such a tiresome act if we did not. Unlike Metatron, we place a greater weight on introspection, thus we shift to the Highest Level in this way perhaps once in a hundred years. However, it is not we who have business with you.”

“Huh? Then...who?” Completely bewildered, Haruyuki looked back and forth between the two higher-level Beings.

It was neither Metatron nor Amaterasu who responded to his question, but instead a fifth person whose voice he could hear from everywhere and nowhere.

“Me.”

Gentle and smooth with a sweetly sour echo. This time, even Haruyuki knew who owned this voice. Because it was the very person who he’d fought the ultimate battle with only one day earlier.

“You...!” He jumped a step back unconsciously and dropped into a ready position.

A new F-type avatar stepped out from behind Amaterasu. Her surprisingly slender form belied the thickness of her armor, and sharp thorns sprouted from every part of her body while parts of her hair adopted rose motifs. There was no mistake; it was the third of the Seven Dwarves, Grumpy, Rose Milady.

“Wh-what are you—?” he started, but then realized with a gasp. The reason was unclear, but the method wasn’t. Just as Haruyuki and Fuko had reached the Highest Level via the link with Metatron, Rose had also borrowed the power of Amaterasu. Which meant...“Rose, are you like a servant or something to

Amaterasu?”

The noblewoman avatar smiled faintly. “I would hope that we’re friends.”

Neither refuting nor affirming this claim, the sun goddess responded. “We have fulfilled your request, Rose. Speak until your heart’s content...Silver Crow.”

Haruyuki stiffened reflexively at hearing his name. “Y-yes!”

“We thank you once more for saving Metatron. Of all the Saints, she is the most restless. Do lend her your aid again in the future.”

“Yes!” He nodded with some force, although he was violently moved by this sudden statement.

Metatron, however, naturally raised a hand and rained a powerful flick down on Haruyuki’s defenseless forehead.

“Ow, ow, ow!” he cried. There was no physical interference in the Highest Level, but he couldn’t help but feel the illusion of pain at Metatron’s attack. He pressed a hand to his forehead, and a faint smile rose up on the part of Amaterasu’s mouth that peeked out from the edge of her fan.

Without any warning whatsoever, the particles of light that made up her avatar scattered. Just as when she’d appeared, all that was left in the space was a sun disc, and then this too shrank into a single point like a video on rewind. The final dot of light flashed several times before disappearing.

Haruyuki lowered the hand pressed to his forehead and looked at the serene Metatron, the dumbfounded Fuko, and Rose Milady, on whose face he could read no expression, before muttering to no one in particular, “Amaterasu’s... inside her first form in the boss room of the Tokyo Station Underground Labyrinth like the— Metatron, right?”

He’d very nearly said “the old Metatron,” but Rose couldn’t have known that the Archangel had left her labyrinth. And he couldn’t go giving any extra intel to a member of a hostile Legion.

And actually, the fact that Rose Milady had been informed that Haruyuki and Fuko were in this place at this time could have been dangerous in and of itself. If she managed to tell her comrades through some means or other, they very

well could ambush Haruyuki and Fuko when they returned to the Mean Level from the Highest Level.

Metatron might have been ignorant of the Burst Linkers' fights, but she had to have understood this logic. Why on earth had she and Amaterasu brought Rose Milady to meet Haruyuki and Fuko?

Haruyuki felt increasingly on guard, rather belatedly.

"That is exactly correct," Metatron replied in her usual regal tone, after glancing at him with closed eyes. "Of the Four Saints, Amaterasu is the most—to borrow one of your words—*shut in*. I don't believe she was exaggerating when she said she shifts to the Highest Level once every hundred years."

"W-wow..."

A hundred years in the Unlimited Neutral Field was thirty-six days and twelve hours, definitely not a brief period of time, even in Haruyuki's real-world perception. What reason could Rose Milady have had to go so far as to bring this shut-in goddess out of hiding and contact Haruyuki and Fuko on the Highest Level?

The noblewoman avatar with her countless thorns maintained her silence, her near-almond-shaped eye lenses firmly fixed on Haruyuki. He wanted to ask her what she wanted, but if he actually gave voice to the words, he would have no choice but to follow where they led. The pressure, alongside his own doubts, wedged into his heart and locked his jaw shut until Fuko gently patted his shoulder. This sensation was also an illusion, but it slowly melted away his nerves, and he let out a deep breath.

"It's been a while, Rose," Fuko remarked quietly.

After another two seconds or so of silence, she nodded slightly. "I wonder how many years it's been since we spoke like this, Raker. I never imagined you'd be here as well."

"I do apologize if I'm interrupting. But now that it's come to this, I can't exactly say nothing and walk away. The situation is...You do understand, don't you?"

From this exchange, it appeared that Rose and Fuko were old acquaintances.

But neither of them seemed particularly interested in reviving that.

The situation Fuko was talking about was, of course, the meeting of the Seven Kings in a few minutes in the real world. Nega Nebulus planned to explode a bomb there: Shihoko's replay card. Essentially, this was the only means they had with which to back the White Legion and the Acceleration Research Society into a corner. Fuko was declaring in a roundabout way that they would not be persuaded or won over regardless of the reasons Oscillatory executive member Rose Milady had for getting in touch with them.

Rose nodded, a hint of sorrow bleeding out onto her dazzlingly beautiful face mask. "I assumed Nega Nebulus would cancel the meeting of the Seven Kings yesterday. Although it's a fact that we lost in the Territories and had our right to control Minato Area Three taken from us, we didn't give you a single piece of evidence with which to censure Oscillatory. Or we shouldn't have. But you didn't request a stop to the meeting. Which means you have some prospect for success."

"You are free to think so if you'd like, but I will neither confirm nor deny," Fuko replied, her tone gentle but resolute. "Rose, you of all people can understand that once the Black King opened hostilities against Oscillatory, she would never withdraw, no matter what happened. She risked level-nine sudden death to take part in the Territories yesterday. Regardless of her prospects or lack thereof for success, the Black King would not cancel the meeting, nor would she shrink from the battle ahead."

"...I suppose not. The depth of Nega Nebulus's determination was communicated more than sufficiently during the Territories." Nodding slowly, Rose Milady turned her eye lenses to Haruyuki. "Corvus, you fought wonderfully yesterday. I never dreamed that you would allow your friend to cut through your own body."

"No. Um. I was just caught up in the fight." Haruyuki had not expected to be complimented in a place like this, and he reflexively hunched inward.

In the Territories the previous day, Haruyuki had defeated Rose Milady, Orchid Oracle's bodyguard, by sacrificing his own body, a strategy that likely wouldn't work on her again. He had blocked her field of view by feinting that he

was going to swing his sword at her, and Trilead had released Heavenly Stratus from behind, a single-blow Incarnate technique that sliced both in half. It was a very particular strategy that could never have come together without the power of Lead's technique, and of course Lime Bell's Citron Call, which could wind back even fatal damage.

But even so, in the height of that fierce battle, Haruyuki had had the vague feeling that if Rose had wanted to, she could have killed him in an instant before he could have gotten anywhere near her. She just...didn't...for some reason.

"And I don't really think I won," he admitted. "We were totally desperate, but you put a limiter on your own power...Although I don't know why."

Rose shrugged her thorny shoulders. "I heard you said the same thing to Oracle. But you're overthinking. Your will was greater than mine, more serious. That's all."

A smile flashed across her face, and Rose looked at Fuko once more.

"Raker, I didn't ask Amaterasu to arrange for me to see you—more precisely to see Silver Crow before the meeting in order to persuade you to withdraw. I just...I wanted to know."

"Know?" Fuko raised an eyebrow. "You all know everything she's doing and yet you still follow the White King, yes? I believe you are much more knowledgeable than we are about what the Acceleration Research Society has done up to now and what they're planning to do from now on."

"I won't deny that. The Seven Dwarves and the Society are separate groups, but in the end, Ivory Tower is the one leading both, after all."

Haruyuki felt a sharp throbbing deep in his heart.

In the previous day's Territories, even though they were fighting the ultimate battle—or maybe precisely for that reason, Haruyuki had felt like he couldn't hate this Burst Linker Rose Milady the way he did Black Vise. But she had announced that she followed the White King in full awareness of the fact that the White Legion and the Acceleration Research Society were two sides of the same coin and the fact that the Society had disseminated the ISS kits and tried

to drive Niko to total point loss. That was probably the same for the rest of the Seven Dwarves—no, every member of the White Legion.

He couldn't, and didn't, want to believe that there existed a logic that could make such evil justifiable. So did that mean that in the end, Rose held the same values as Black Vise, Argon Array, and Dusk Taker? Unconsciously, he clenched his hands into fists.

Perhaps noticing this change, the noblewoman silently shifted to face Haruyuki squarely. She stared at him, her eyes basically at the same height as his own. "Corvus, it's only natural that you hate us. I doubt that anything I could say could change that feeling in you. Oscillatory has its own reasons for fighting, and they are absolutely incompatible with Nega Nebulus's."

"So then!" Haruyuki shouted in a strangled voice, clenching his fists even tighter. "So then why did you call me here?! Attacks on avatars don't work in the Highest Level, and you already know we're not going to get anywhere talking to each other. Isn't this meeting pointless?!" He sounded a tiny bit like a child sobbing convulsively, and Rose didn't reply right away.

Instead, breaking her unusual silence, Metatron began to speak. "Your awareness that any attack is nullified is incorrect, servant."

"Huh?" Haruyuki gaped, though his surprise turned into a shiver of fear the instant he heard what the Archangel said next.

"What is ineffective in the Highest Level is at most interference with the individual. For those who have learned the methodology, it *is* possible to interfere with the connection *between* individuals."

The connection—in other words, the link.

Haruyuki gasped, and Metatron nodded at him before turning her face to Rose.

"Rose Malady or whatever it was. Is Snow Fairy not going to appear in this place?"

Right. The second Rose Milady had appeared, that name should have been the first thing that came to his mind. In the opening stages of the Territories the day before, Haruyuki had shifted his consciousness to the Highest Level

together with Metatron, and Snow Fairy, the second of the Seven Dwarves, had appeared there. In a total reversal of her adorable girl-type appearance, she had mercilessly attempted to sever the link between Haruyuki and Metatron. In a certain sense, it was an attack more frightening than the Incarnate technique Brinicle, which instantly killed at first touch.

“No.” Rose shook her head slightly. “I haven’t told Fairy—or anyone in the Legion, for that matter—about this contact. Although Fairy’s always been able to shift to the Highest Level without borrowing the power of a Being, so there’s a nonzero possibility that she might show up suddenly.”

Haruyuki couldn’t help but whirl his head around to examine their surroundings. But only the galaxy of nodes flickered quietly in the inky black space; he couldn’t pick up any other aura there. He let out a sigh of relief, until a thought struck him:

“Um, Metatron. You said before that there’d never been a Burst Linker who could reach the Highest Level on their own power, right? But Snow Fairy—”

“I said that there *shouldn’t* be, servant,” the Archangel corrected before adding, “And I have no doubt that Snow Fairy also obtained help from a high-level Being in the beginning. Although I don’t know if it was one of the Four Saints or someone else.”

“What? There are Beings other than the Four Saints who can talk like you guys?”

“Conversely, why would you think there are not?” Metatron asked, exasperated.

Fuko chose that moment to toss him a life preserver. “Corvus, the Four Gods of the Castle do speak, you know.”

“Oh. R-right...”

“Well, I don’t expect that those Gods would assist a Burst Linker, however,” the Archangel sniffed.

Haruyuki was of the exact same opinion. Or rather, if they could have built a friendly relationship with even just one of the Gods, there would no longer be any need to charge the four gates with sheer force.

According to Graphite Edge, two developers had designed the Unlimited Neutral Field. One sought an eternal seal for the final Arc, TFL—The Fluctuating Light—while the other wanted its release. Developer A, who sought the seal, had generated a super-massive dungeon around TFL—aka the Castle—and set on guard around it four Legend-class Enemies, the Four Gods. In contrast, in order to cultivate a Burst Linker who could attack the Four Gods and the Castle, developer B, seeking the release of TFL, had produced everything else—the Four Saints and the four great dungeons, the lower-class Enemies, the shops, and perhaps even the Brain Burst game system of normal duels and Territories itself.

And it wasn't just Brain Burst. There was a strong possibility that the similar hidden games of Accel Assault 2038 and Cosmos Corrupt 2040, which came immediately before and after Brain Burst, were developer B's designs as well. If a player moved to a sufficiently elevated place like the Highest Level, they should have been able to see that the galaxy of light that made up the world was threefold.

If the Four Gods knew of this antagonistic relationship between the developers, then perhaps it was only natural that they would view Burst Linkers with absolute hostility, while the Four Saints, also enemies of the Gods, would try and forge bonds with them, like Metatron and Amaterasu had. But Haruyuki didn't want to believe that Metatron's actions were a result of system control. He wanted to believe that the proud Archangel, calling herself not an Enemy but a Being, had the same free will as he did.

Someday, he was going to break through the guard of the Four Gods with Metatron, Kuroyukihime, and the rest of his Legion comrades and enter the Castle. To that end, too, they had to finish the fight with the Acceleration Research Society sooner rather than later.

Perhaps sensing Haruyuki's slightly tangential resolve, Metatron moved to stand to his right. She put a hand on his shoulder as if to tell him to concentrate on the here and now.

"It is unfortunate that Snow Fairy will not be coming." Her voice was gentle as she uttered the harsh words. "I was hoping to strip her naked this time."

“N-naked...?!”

“Servant, that was a figurative expression.”

“Y-yes, I know,” was all he could manage when a Being explained his own language to him like this, and then he let out a deep sigh. Deciding to tuck the possibility of Snow Fairy charging in on them away in the back of his mind, he shifted his gaze to Rose.

“I told you, didn’t I, Corvus?” she replied, sounding as relaxed as ever. “I didn’t call you here to persuade you, but because I wanted to know. Apparently, you told Orkki—well, Orchid Oracle—that the one who pushed Originator Princess Sakuya, Saffron Blossom, to total point loss was the White King.”

Haruyuki wasn’t the only one who suddenly gasped. Fuko did the same next to him. He hadn’t expected this line of questioning, but he had indeed told Oracle already, so there was no point in hiding the information at this point.

“I’d never heard that nickname before, but...there’s no mistake that it was the White King who pushed Saffron to total loss. When I merged with the Armor of Catastrophe and became the sixth Chrome Disaster, I saw the memories of Saffron’s partner, Chrome Falcon. The one who actually attacked Saffron was the Legend-class Enemy Jormungand, but the three of them were also definitely there. Black Vise held her down, Argon Array monitored the situation, and White Cosmos regenerated her.”

It was a tale he’d told any number of times, but even so, the anger, despair, and sadness that Falcon had felt at that time came back to vivid life, and Haruyuki pressed his hand firmly against his chest. He pushed past the pain to continue.

“The White King was wrapped in a strange light, so I couldn’t see her...But I’ll never forget the name of the special attack that brought Saffron back to life over and over again. Resurrect by Compassion. You must know that technique, right?”

Rose Milady didn’t speak or move for a while. And then a thorn-adorned arm rose up soundlessly. She pressed a hand to her chest as Haruyuki had and hung her head deeply. After another ten seconds or so of silence, Rose spoke, her

voice hoarse, devoid of all its glamour.

“I know it. I’ve been revived by it. It seems I have no choice but to believe you. That the one who pushed Saffron Blossom—my and Orkki’s parent—to total point loss was the Acceleration Research Society and the White King.”

“What?!” Haruyuki groaned. “You’re Saffron’s child, too, Rose?!”

“It wouldn’t be strange if she were, Corvus,” Fuko murmured. She brought her face up to Haruyuki’s helmet and imparted the knowledge of a veteran Linker. “In the dawn of the Accelerated World, there was no limit on the number of BB program copies. As long as you found someone who met the criteria for a Burst Linker, you could try to install it any number of times. I’ve only heard about these kinds of things, but apparently, some Originators had more than thirty children.”

“Thirty...”

With just that, parent and children could form a large-scale Legion. Seeing him dumbfounded, Rose, having recovered her composure to some extent, wrapped her arms around herself.

“Saffron didn’t have that many children,” she offered quietly. “As far as I know, there are eleven including me and Orkki. I don’t know if it’s just a coincidence or not, but all of us have plant color names. None of us has especially great battle power. But even after Saffron and Falcon were gone, we tried to launch the mutual assistance Legion with just us, but we ended up disbanding without managing to take a single territory.”

“When we first met, you were already a member of Oscillatory Universe, weren’t you, Rose?” Fuko asked, her tone subdued, like she was trying to kill any emotion in it. “Did the other ten children all go under the protection of the White King?”

“No.” The hair so reminiscent of a bouquet of roses shook from side to side. “It was only me and Orkki that Oscillatory picked up. The White King said she would invite them into the Legion when we found the other nine, but even though Orkki and I went searching on matching lists all over the place every day, we couldn’t find a single one of them. And then even Orkki—I don’t know what happened, but she just disappeared one day.” Rose hung her head.

As he stared at her, the words he'd heard from Oracle the previous day came back to life in his mind. When Haruyuki had asked her why she lost all her points and how she'd come back to life, Oracle—Megumi Wakamiya—had said, "That alone I don't know. Not me. And not Rose, either."

Looking very much like her thorns themselves had shrunk, Rose continued her monologue.

"I was depressed after I lost Orkki, and the White King promised me she would analyze Brain Burst and bring Orkki and Saffron back to life someday. I believed her, and I tried as best I could to get stronger. I went up the ranks of the Legion bit by bit. I joined the Seven Dwarves. And before I knew it, six years had passed. But...But yesterday, Orkki really did come back. You can't even imagine my surprise and joy when she appeared at the strategy meeting before the Territories."

Haruyuki had never lost a Burst Linker he had formed a strong bond with to total point loss, so naturally, he had never experienced such a person coming back to life. Fuko and Metatron stood by silently.

Rose Milady glanced at them and then lowered her eye lenses once again.

"I don't know how, but the White King kept her promise. The things she did with the Acceleration Research Society were not a mistake. One day, just like with Orkki, she would bring Saffron Blossom back to life...I believed that. But...right before the end of the Territories, Orkki said she was lying to us. That it was the White King herself who had pushed Saffron to total point loss in the first place, so she would absolutely never bring her back to life for us. I...I couldn't believe it. And we lost the Territories because Orkki betrayed us and turned the field back...I thought Nega Nebulus did something to her, and I said terrible things to her, even though we'd only just been reunited."

"Um!" Haruyuki said, unable to stand it any longer. "Um, what is Oracle doing right now? Kuro—the Black King hasn't been able to get in touch with her since yesterday..."

"Neither have I. She wasn't at the debriefing after the Territories. Her name wasn't on the matching list, and I can't find her from the Highest Level either. She's probably had her global connection off since yesterday." Rose's reply was

cool, but she wavered at the end for just an instant, perhaps reflecting a worry she couldn't entirely suppress. "And it's no wonder. After all, her older sister treated her like a traitor when they were reunited after six years apart. I mean, if I could, I'd like to get some distance from the Accelerated World myself...But I'm not permitted that kind of luxury."

"Is that because you're the third of the Seven Dwarves?" he asked.

"No. It's because I'm a Burst Linker," Rose declared, and there was no wobble in her voice now. She pulled herself up to her full height and took a deep breath. The countless thorns drawn out in points of white light became slightly longer and sharper; it was no illusion. "Thank you, Silver Crow...Sky Raker, and the Being Metatron. I was able to gain the knowledge I was seeking. It was our King White Cosmos who drove Saffron Blossom to total point loss. And she is not going to bring Saffron back to life."

Depending on how you saw it, these words could have been taken as a farewell declaration to the White King and the White Legion. Unconsciously, Haruyuki took a step forward and asked the rose aristocrat, "What are you going to do now, Rose?"

"I'll do what has to be done for Orchid Oracle's sake, and for Saffron Blossom's," she answered briefly. She pressed her right hand to her chest and bowed gracefully, and then the particles of light that comprised Rose Milady's avatar dispersed and vanished from the Highest Level.

The one to first break the silence that followed was Metatron. "There are all kinds of little warriors, hmm?"

"Well, of course. There are a thousand Burst Linkers, after all," Haruyuki said.

Metatron jabbed his helmet. "That pales in the face of the sum total of Beings...At any rate, if this contact engenders even a slight change in Rose Milady's action priority ranking, then there was also meaning in responding to Amaterasu's request."

"Action priority ranking?" He cocked his head to one side. Metatron was as difficult to understand as ever.

Fuko giggled as she interpreted for him. "She means that maybe this will bring

about a change in Rose's blind loyalty to the White King, Corvus. It's only natural for Legion members to do everything they can for their masters, but it's no good to anyone if you stop using your own head and plug your ears."

"....."

He unconsciously stared hard at Fuko. "Do you mean...you and Kuroyukihime?"

"Of course." A grin full of affection rose up on Sky Raker's face. "You know very well how I'm always finding fault with Sacchi, don't you, Corvus?"

"R-right, well, that's true." Now that she mentioned it, she had been picking at how much skin Kuroyukihime was showing in the car, but he wasn't sure if that was part of what she was talking about.

But then Metatron moved directly in front of him and announced sternly, "You must never doubt me, servant. You must always obey me."

After returning from the Highest Level to the Mean Level, Fuko and Haruyuki conferred with Metatron for a moment before using the portal in front of Fufuan to return to the real world.

He had no sooner woken up in the air-conditioned car with a sigh than Kuroyukihime was asking from the front seat, her voice slightly thorny, "So then, Haruyuki, what did Metatron want?"

"Oh! R-right..."

He lifted his face to find her twisted around and leaning forward through the gap between the passenger and driver seats. Her puffed-out cheeks indicated a seven on the ten-point scale of Kuroyukihime's mood meter. He checked the time on his virtual desktop and saw that not even eight seconds had passed during his dive, but everyone in the car knew that this was equivalent to two hours in the Unlimited Neutral Field.

He opened his mouth to explain the events in the Accelerated World from square one, but he couldn't actually sort it all out in his head since so many unexpected things had happened. So he merely flapped his mouth open and closed like a fish out of water, until Fuko tossed him another life preserver from the driver's seat.

“I’ll explain, Sacchi.”

He didn’t think Metatron and Fuko got along particularly well, so when Sky Raker appeared in the Wasteland stage, he’d felt a shiver of fear at the idea of what might happen next, but now he could only be grateful and truly happy that she had chased after him. Of course, part of that was the fact that she had given Metatron access to the shelter of her digital house, but it was also that she had acted as a buffer in the conversation with Rose Milady. And more than anything else, she was now able to explain the situation to Kuroyukihime and the others at least ten times more smoothly than Haruyuki could have managed, and much more succinctly. She neatly finished her tale with three minutes to spare before the meeting of the Seven Kings was to start at one o’clock.

“That’s a surprise,” Kuroyukihime said with a sigh and leaned back in the semi-bucket seat. “*The Grumpy*, Rose Milady, doing that...”

“But I kind of get it,” Chiyuri commented. She had fought Rose alongside Haruyuki and Trilead in the Territories the previous day. “I mean, it felt like Rose was fighting more to protect Oracle than to beat Nega Nebulus. And if they have the same parent, they’re kinda like sisters and stuff. And on top of that, it’s only the two of them left in the Accelerated World.”

“Mmm. True.” Kuroyukihime started to turn toward the back seat as though she wanted to say something else, but then turned forward again right away. “Two minutes until the meeting of the Seven Kings. Fuko, Haruyuki, one thing: Do you think this contact with Rose Milady will have any sort of effect on the meeting?”

“No,” Haruyuki answered reflexively and then snapped his mouth shut. He looked to the driver’s seat, but Fuko stayed facing forward. They only had a brief period of time left, so he had to actually finish his thought quickly. He took a second to sort himself out and then opened his mouth once more. “Ivory Tower’ll be the only person from the White Legion at the meeting again. She might be able to contact him before then, but of course, we didn’t say anything to her about Choco’s replay card. And it seemed like she knew Black Vise’s true identity is Ivory Tower. So even if she did manage to get some information from us, I don’t think she’d go out of her way to help Ivory after he drove her parent

Saffron to total point loss.”

“That’s...Do you mean there’s a possibility that Rose might leave Oscillatory?” Chiyuri asked.

“Probably not,” Fuko answered. “At the very least, not without Orchid Oracle.”

He heard a sharp electronic buzz in his mind just then. The alarm he’d set for one minute to one.

“Yesterday, right before the end of the Territories, I begged Oracle—Megumi. Leave Oscillatory Universe, join Nega Nebulus,” Kuroyukihime confessed, and Fuko and Chiyuri gasped quietly. “But she wouldn’t answer me. She just apologized and then grabbed my sword to push it through her own chest...I haven’t been able to get in touch with her since. But I’m not giving up.”

Thirty seconds.

“Once we expose Ivory Tower and his evil deeds at today’s meeting, the joint five-Legion subjugation mission will begin. Before it does, I want to get Oracle... and if she wants, Rose, out of Oscillatory Universe. Everyone. I hope I can count on your help.”

Not one of them responded to this request from their Legion Master in words. Instead, they stretched out their hands and placed them firmly on top of one another’s above the central console. Finally, Kuroyukihime laid her own hand on the pile and squeezed tightly.

Five seconds.

Nodding at each other, the five Burst Linkers leaned back in their seats again and closed their eyes.

In the darkness behind his eyelids, a flame-colored system message blazed to life.

A REGISTERED DUEL IS BEGINNING!!

Upon his return, the sky of the Accelerated World was an unsettling yellowish-green. The group of buildings he could see off in the distance shone with a metallic luster, organic gills and protrusions sprouting from all sides, while small insects halfway between creature and machine crawled along on the similarly metallic ground. *Chk-chk-chk*.

This was a Purgatory stage, classified as a dark type.

“I suppose it’s not quite as bad as a Cemetery or a Plague, but I am hard pressed to say this stage is particularly suitable for a meeting,” a young lady avatar with semi-lustrous chocolate armor remarked from next to Haruyuki. Chocolat Puppeteer.

He froze for a second at her slightly formal speech, quite unlike the way the real world’s Shihoko Nago spoke, before nodding in agreement. “Y-yeah.”

Just as she’d said, the terrain gimmicks of a Purgatory stage did little damage compared with other dark types, but they were still fairly unpleasant. If you stepped on one of the metal bugs, insects would swarm, drawn in by the scent of bodily fluids, and earthworm-like tubes would pop up out of the ground every so often and emit a terrible-smelling smoke.

“But it’s only hard for the starters, Cobalt and Manga,” he noted. “We’re the Gallery, so no big really.”

“Oh reaaaalllly? Is that how it is then? I’m totally telling Coba-Manga when the meeting’s over!” a magical girl avatar in vivid yellow-green armor shouted from behind. Lime Bell.

“Y-you can’t!” Haruyuki whirled around and made a large X with his arms. “They’ll lop my head off!”

“No, you were in the wrong here, Crow,” Black Lotus said, appearing after Lime Bell when he had just parted with her minutes earlier in subjective time, all black quartz semitransparent armor and greatsword limbs.

“You were, Corvus. You need to sympathize more with girls,” Fuko agreed. She was back in her white dress and wheelchair with Gale Thruster safely stored away now.

Haruyuki was about to argue that he had a theory that girls were actually the stronger ones in the Accelerated World, something he’d always felt. In fact, of the Seven Kings, over half—red, purple, black, white—were F types. But before he could speak, he heard someone shouting.

“Suuuuuuup!”

And then a red lump slammed into him. After delivering a cross chop to his neck, the lump landed nimbly on the ground: a girl-type avatar in ruby-red armor with eye lenses reminiscent of jade.

They were both part of the Gallery, so the hit didn’t generate any damage, but it did cause him to grumble inwardly about how his theory of feminine superiority was obviously true before he returned the greeting. “Sup, Rain. You get a good sleep last night?”

“Hey! What’s that about? You calling me a kid?!” the Red King barked, steel in her voice, and he hesitated about whether or not he should remind her that elementary school kids are in fact kids.

“OFC. Kids that sleep grow,” the crimson avatar with the leopard head interjected abruptly after approaching on silent feet from the same direction as Rain. She picked up the Red King from where she sat slumped on bent knees and hoisted her up onto her shoulders.

“H-hey, Pard! You’re deliberately treating me like a kid now,” Rain started to complain, but then gave up, the strength sliding out of her. She looked down on Haruyuki from Blood Leopard’s shoulders. “Finally the moment of do or die.”

Her words held an increasing amount of kingly gravitas, and the other king responded.

“Mmm. But for us, the battle against Seiryu at the Castle east gate, against

Metatron at Tokyo Midtown Tower, and against Black Vise and the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, at the Eternal Girls' Academy, along with the battles against Great Wall in Shibuya Area Three and against Oscillatory Universe yesterday, were all do-or-die moments. And it's not as though the fight will end with today's meeting. We will simply do everything we can, as we always have. I'm counting on all of you."

The Black King looked at all six of the faces before her and stopped finally on Chocolat. "And Choco, the replay card you have will be the key to today's success or failure. I know we are placing a terrible burden on you at your first meeting of the Seven Kings, but I know you will come through for us."

"Y-yes, I understand. As a member of Nega Nebulus, I will carry out my role to the best of my abilities," Chocolat declared, although her voice shook just a little.

Kuroyukihime nodded deeply and tapped Chocolat's arm with the side of the sword of her right hand before whirling around.

The seven of them were gathered in the southwest of the area positioned to the north of the Castle, Kitanomaru Park. In the real world, the site of the Imperial Palace was a roughly oblong hexagon, but in the Accelerated World, the Castle was situated on a perfect circle. Kitanomaru Park, the east gardens, and the outer garden were lined up from the north to the southeast, and as a general rule, meetings of the Seven Kings were held in one of these.

There were plenty of museums and galleries where they could've met in the south of Kitanomaru Park, the location selected for this meeting by the Blue Legion's Dualis, Cobalt Blade and Manganese Blade, but the guide cursor that told them the location of the duelers was pointing to the north of the park. They moved forward through the thick, drifting fog, and the silhouette of a strange building appeared ahead.

Large octagonal roof with sharp overhangs. A knotted, veiny onion-like object sitting on the peak like a monster's chrysalis. Several sinister thorns twisted out from the walls, and the wide entrance looked like a gaping maw replete with razor-sharp fangs.

"That's the Nippon Budokan...right?" Chiyuri stopped in her tracks and stared

up at the onion. “That’s a serious coincidence— No, I guess it’s maybe not a coincidence at all.”

“Whoa, whoa!” Niko yelled. “Time to sound the alarms here! Does this mean Leos cracked the professor in the real?”

“Well, I doubt that.” Chiyuri quickly turned her gaze toward Haruyuki.

The professor aka Takumu Mayuzumi was currently competing in the Tokyo Metropolitan Junior High School Summer Kendo Meet, and the venue was the very Nippon Budokan towering up before them now. Hence Chiyuri’s cry of a “serious coincidence.” Haruyuki had known that the meeting would be taking place in the vicinity of the Imperial Palace, so he’d wanted to go over and cheer for Takumu once it was over, but as the Animal Care Club president, he couldn’t exactly take a day off from looking after Hoo. So he’d entrusted Chiyuri with the very important task of cheering for Takumu for both of them.

Takumu was competing in both the group and individual divisions, so unless he lost his first match, he would still be competing after the meeting of the Seven Kings was over. The lunch break should have been ending at that moment and the afternoon matches starting.

If Takumu was in the top six in the group division—the best four plus the two winners in a competition among the losers—and the top four for the individual division, he would get to compete in the Kanto meet at the same Budokan in the middle of August. The Umesato Junior High boys’ kendo team was in a tough position, having squeaked by in the best eight in the metropolitan meet preliminaries, but Haruyuki knew only too well how much effort Takumu had put into the team every day ever since he had transferred to the school in January of that year.

Taku, you got this.

After sending this thought toward his best friend fighting at the real-world Budokan, Haruyuki answered Chiyuri, “I know I’m out in the real to Coba-Manga, but it’s the same for them. I don’t think they’d actually go to the trouble of looking up Pile’s real and having the meeting venue in the same place as the meet. For one thing, there’d be no point in it.”

“That’s true.” Kuroyukihime spread the sword of her right arm out to one

side. “The Chiyoda area is not split up, so if they wanted to fight Pile, they wouldn’t have to come all the way to Budokan. It’s possible to challenge him from anywhere within the area. It’s a coincidence just as Bell said. Or if they do have a reason, it has nothing to do with Pile. Now, let’s get inside already.”

“Aaawright! This is it!” Niko slapped her fist into the palm of her other hand, and Fuko, Pard, Chiyuri, and Haruyuki all nodded as one.

They went up the wide stairs and slipped through the tooth-laden entrance. When they proceeded down the gloomy hall, they soon came out into the vast arena. In the real world, would-be swordmasters ruthlessly competed on a cool, clear wooden floor, but in the Accelerated World’s Purgatory stage, disturbingly sinuous gills were carved out of the floor, and the surrounding spectator seats resembled a bizarre insect species.

Haruyuki was the first to set foot in the foggy arena.

“You’re late!!” someone shouted ferociously, and he reflexively shrank back into himself.

The shouter was half of a duo encamped on the right side of the entrance Haruyuki and his friends had just stepped through. A tall, F-type avatar in a military cap with a long brim, whip bundled on her back at her waist. Next to her, a queenly avatar clad in vivid purple armor sat on a cylindrical seat, holding a long staff in one hand. The Purple Legion’s Submaster Aurora Oval, as well as Aster Vine and the Purple King, Purple Thorn.

Aster Vine snapped the sharply pointed index finger of her left hand at Haruyuki. “It has been more than three minutes since the start of the duel! How dare you dawdle in last when you were the ones to convene this meeting?!”

He quickly looked around and saw that four small groups joined Vine’s at evenly spaced intervals to create a circle in an arena that was the same octagonal shape as the roof. The Green King, Green Grandé; the fifth seat of that Legion’s executive Six Armors, Iron Pound; and its fifth seat, Suntan Chafer. The Yellow King, Yellow Radio, and the girl avatar balancing on a ball who was apparently called Lemon Pierrette. The Blue King, Blue Knight, and the starters for this meeting, the Dualis Cobalt Blade and Manganese Blade. And the magician avatar clad in his ivory costume sitting all alone on the opposite side

of Haruyuki and his comrades, the full proxy of the White King, Ivory Tower.

“He really did come, calm as ever,” Kuroyukihime murmured, not bothered in the least by Aster Vine’s rebuke.

Fuko brought her wheelchair up beside Haruyuki and pushed her wide brimmed hat up slightly. “I do apologize for our tardiness, Vine. But we appeared in the southern edge of Kitanomaru Park, so it took us some time to get here.”

“Then why didn’t you run?!” Vine snapped in return, hands on hips, more schoolteacher than soldier.

When Haruyuki thought about it, the sisters Coba-Manga had created the meeting venue’s normal duel space, and he and his comrades were part of the Gallery, so they should have appeared somewhere they could see the sisters. Why had they materialized so far away? He cocked his head to one side, curious.

“Don’t be so angry, Vine. We set scattered positioning.”

“We thought some Legions would want to talk before the meeting.”

Cobalt Blade and Manganese Blade, respectively, spoke from the east side of the arena.

Scattered positioning was an option when starting a duel that basically made Gallery contact impossible. Rather than appearing near the duelers, the spectators appeared some distance away. This setting was used when duelers wanted to avoid any possibility of being cracked in the real that came with appearing in a particular location in the Accelerated World or to move the battlefield before the spectators assembled. But the Gallery would teleport once the fighting started, so almost no one actually used this setting.

But in the case of the meeting of the Seven Kings, the two starters didn’t fight, so there was no automatic movement, and the scattered spectators needed a few minutes to come together. It was true that Haruyuki and his comrades had spent a bit of time in discussion, though, so this was a nice calculation on the part of the twins. He was impressed.

However.

“Pointless consideration, Dualis. It is only natural that consultations and the like would be taken care of before the meeting. Raker, you will be more careful next time!” Aster Vine’s attitude was essentially unchanged, but she seemed satisfied at getting to tell off Sky Raker, who had apparently been a rival for some time. She snorted haughtily before stepping back behind the Purple King.

Haruyuki glanced up and saw that the remaining time had already dropped down to twenty-five minutes. Perhaps also thinking that the time was right, the meeting chair the Blue King stood, his heavy armor clanking. He looked at Cobalt Blade, and she nodded before opening her Instruct menu, most likely to scroll through the Gallery list.

“All eighteen scheduled participants are here,” she informed him. “There are no unexpected intruders.”

“Good. Let’s get started.” The Blue King announced the beginning of the meeting, as plainspoken as ever. At the same time, Kuroyukihime stepped ahead of Haruyuki and Fuko and sat down gracefully on the stool likely created by the Dualis cutting the pillars of the arena.

A total of seven chairs had been prepared, one of which sat empty in between Kuroyukihime’s seat directly to the north and the Blue King’s directly to the east. Naturally, this was meant for the Red King, but Niko took up position behind Kuroyukihime and crossed her arms across her chest to indicate that she would not, in fact, be using that chair.

The fact that Nega Nebulus and Prominence had merged would have been displayed system-wide if anyone attacked Suginami or Nerima during the Territories, so the Kings with their powerful information collection capabilities had likely long known about it. To be more precise, the two Legions were currently in the middle of the thirty-day merger deferment period, with provisional Legion Master Black Lotus, provisional Submaster Scarlet Rain, and provisional name Nega Nebulus, but it was clear to all that the two Legions had become one.

Neither Blue Knight nor Purple Thorn reacted in any way when Niko remained standing. The agenda for that day’s meeting was how to handle the Acceleration Research Society, so the kings likely had no intention of touching

on the merger between red and black. Or so Haruyuki had thought.

“Before we get to the main item, may I be permitted one question?” Although serious in tone, the high-pitched voice contained a laugh somehow as it echoed through the arena. An odious yellow avatar stood slowly between the Purple King and Ivory Tower on the southeast of the arena.

Although he was as tall as the Blue King if the jester’s cap on his head was included, his limbs and torso were thin like Rose Milady’s and he slouched quite a bit, so at first glance, he didn’t seem very intimidating. But this caricature of a Pierrot emitted an aura on par with the other kings, and Haruyuki was seized by the sensation of sweat breaking out on the naked body of his avatar beneath his armor.

“He doesn’t miss a beat,” Fuko muttered.

“That’s fine, but be quick about it,” the Blue King, the meeting’s chair, responded, sounding slightly annoyed.

“Of course, of course. I’ll be done in three minutes.” Bobbing his head in the jerky motion of a doll, the Yellow King sounded like he was about to burst out laughing, as always. “I simply wished to confirm a teensy issue. What are we to call that faded red wee one now?”

“Weeee oooooone noooow!” the girl on the balancing ball parroted.

“What exactly is that supposed to mean, Radio?” the Blue King asked doubtfully.

Radio spread his skinny arms out to either side. “The little one there has never been a pure...red, hmm? And now at long last, she’s no longer even a Legion Master, yes? Must we really continue to call such a person the Red King?”

“The Reeed Kiiiing!”

“What?!” Haruyuki shouted instead of Niko, the king in question, or her deputy, Leopard. He had been bowed by the Yellow King’s information pressure, but the instant he heard Radio speak, he felt a bomb go off inside his head and he lashed out without thinking.

Immediately, every king but Black had their eyes on him, together with king proxy Ivory Tower. But his indignation was even greater than the intensity of their combined gazes.

“The Red King agreed to the Legion merger in order to settle things with the Acceleration Research Society!” Haruyuki shouted even more loudly at the Yellow King. “You don’t get to talk to Rain like that, not after she cleaned up your mess when the Society had you dancing to their tune with the whole Armor of Catastrophe thing!”

There might have been a world of difference between level-six Haruyuki and level-nine Yellow King in terms of actual power as Burst Linkers, but Radio nevertheless pulled back, daunted; maybe Haruyuki’s words had hit a little too close to home.

“My goodness, this little boy has no manners, hmm? I was not discussing the Armor or anything of the like. I simply wondered whether one who was no longer Legion Master was qualified to be King?”

“*You* of all people! You do nothing for the sake of the Accelerated World—” Haruyuki wanted to keep going, but Kuroyukihime gently raised the sword of her right hand ahead of him, while Niko smiled wryly at him, a signal that he should let it go.

Given that both his Legion Master and Submaster had admonished him, he couldn’t exactly keep kicking up a fuss, so he closed his mouth and took a few steps back. Instantly, the awareness that he’d gone too far welled up within him, and he broke out in a cold sweat beneath his silver surface.

“O-oh my goodness, Corvus,” Shihoko whispered behind him, clinging tightly to Chiyuri. However, Haruyuki’s entire body was now so stiff, he couldn’t turn around to look at her.

“Crow goes off sometimes and gets hotheaded,” Chiyuri offered with a similar whisper-hiss. “Even though the switch never gets flipped when it comes to his own well-being.”

“Aah.” Chocolat nodded. “That does seem very like him.”

He listened to the two girls without really paying attention, and ahead of him,

Kuroyukihime's calm voice rang out.

"Radio, the title of king itself has always been organic in nature, yes? It has never been strictly defined, so those who wish to continue to call Rain the Red King are free to do so. And if you do not want to refer to her by that title, then go ahead and do not. I, of course, have absolutely no intention of changing what I call her."

"T'be honest, I don't care two bits about titles and stuff," Niko remarked. "A new level niner's gonna show sooner rather than later anyway, an' there's basically a zero percent chance they're gonna be this 'pure color' you keep goin' on about, yeah? No matter which way you look at it, it's pretty dumb to get all nitpicky about callin' 'em King or not every single time."

"H-however," Radio replied, pained, Kuroyukihime and Niko's curt reactions clearly contrary to his expectations. "It is a fact that we Seven Kings of pure color have expended great effort for many years to keep the Accelerated World safe, yes? It is precisely because you recognize the authority of this council that you have convened us here today, hmm? Isn't it entirely too selfish to say that we should break this framework down with no discussion whatsoever and simply do whatever we want?"

"We waaaaant!" Lemon Pierrette sang out the end of Radio's question.

Niko glanced at the girl on the balance ball and shrugged lightly. "So, like, are you trying to make a big deal out of me stepping down as LM or about the merger between Negabu and Promi? Make that clear before you start whining."

"That is— Of course, I include all of it? If you are going to call yourself the Red King, then there's a little thing called pride that goes along with that—"

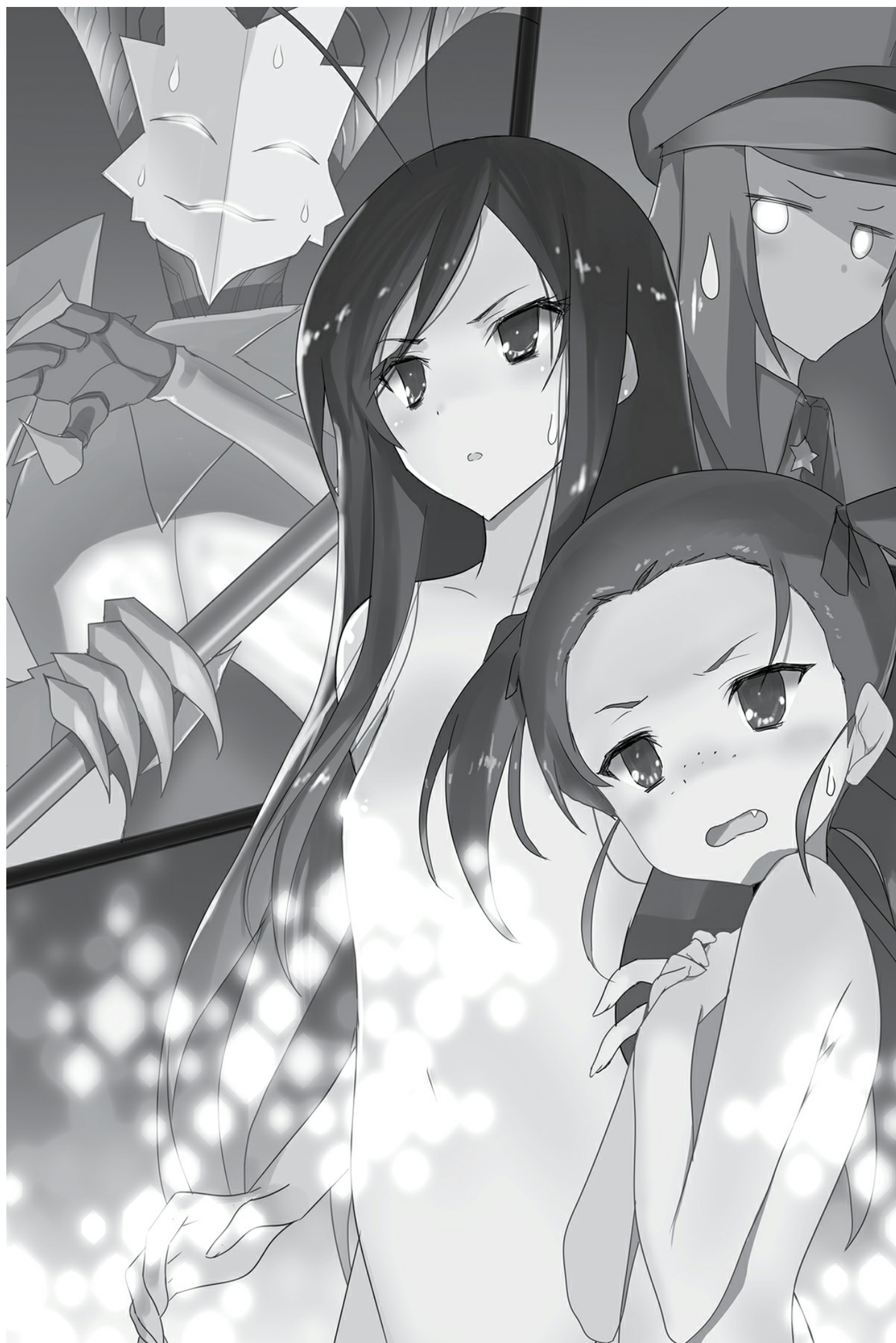
"Aah, enough! We've already wasted three minutes on this!" Kuroyukihime stood tall, cutting off the Yellow King. She snapped the sword of her right hand out at Radio and made her resolute voice echo through the large arena. "This is annoying, so I will spell it out here and now! Radio, it is not the fact that Rain stepped down as Master that you dislike, but rather our merger with Prominence. More precisely, the fact that Promi did not merge with Crypt Cosmic Circus! Am I wrong?!"

"Huh?" Haruyuki said, baffled.

Yellow Radio also groaned, his voice growing increasingly shrill. “Wh-what are you talking about, you? Such a rash remark with no basis whatsoever! To say I had my eye on the territory of Prominence—”

“No! What you wanted was not the territory, but Rain herself! Yellow Radio, you have a weakness for super-small F-type avatars with round forms. Were you not planning to take advantage of the current chaos to annex Promi and get Rain in your grip?!”

Kuroyukihime’s accusation caused a silence of more than three seconds to descend on the Budokan arena.



And then Niko groaned. “F-for real?!”

“That definitely puts a damper on things,” Aster Vine sighed.

“...Is that true?” Even Lemon Pierrette, most certainly an SS-size, F-type avatar, wobbled away from him on her balance ball, and the Yellow King, Radioactive Disturber Yellow Radio, took unexpected action.

Bomf! A cloud of colorful smoke erupted and enveloped Radio.

Although the smoke quickly dissipated, by the time it was gone, the chair was already empty. The Blue King shook his head slowly from side to side, while the Green King maintained his silence even now. To his rear, Iron Pound and Suntan Chafer exchanged dumbfounded murmurs.

“How did he use an ability when he’s in the Gallery?”

“It can’t be Incarnate, can it?”

“Nah, nah, you can’t use that either...”

“Honestly.” It was the Purple King, Purple Thorn, who brought this unanticipated tangent to a close, breaking her own silence. “It doesn’t matter either way if Radio has a Lolita complex. Neither myself nor Aster are on his radar in any way.”

“And what about me?” Niko grumbled.

Thorn ignored her. “No doubt, he’s hiding somewhere nearby and listening in. If he has something he wishes to say, poof! He will no doubt appear, so let’s leave him be and get to the main item on the agenda. We’re already down to twenty minutes.”

“Yes, right.” Blue Knight hit the metallic floor with the tip of the scabbard of the Arc Impulse to shift the mood in the meeting venue. “Now then, I’d ask Lotus for an overview of the battle that took place during the Territories yesterday.”

“Understood.” Kuroyukihime stayed on her feet. “It’s all quite simple, however. At the previous meeting, we proposed that the seven Legions immediately muster their forces and attack when the base area of the Acceleration Research Society became clear, and this proposal was accepted.

With this in mind, we engaged in an attack yesterday on the area we have long thought to be the base of the Acceleration Research Society. We intended to check the matching list immediately after the right to control the area—in other words, the privilege of blocking the matching list was stripped away—and if the names of the Society members appeared there, we would be able to prove that this was indeed their base. Naturally, we would have to ask some trusted third party to check the list. Thus, we requested that Leonids’ Dualis take on that role.”

Everyone in the venue turned their eyes toward Cobalt Blade and Manganese Blade, on standby behind the Blue King.

“And...what were the results?” Purple Thorn sounded impatient, and Kuroyukihime nodded to the sisters.

The ponytailed Manganese Blade stepped out in front of the Blue King. “We checked the matching list immediately after Nega Nebulus’s victory in the Territories.”

Haruyuki unconsciously held his breath even though he already knew the result of this.

Manganese Blade stated the facts in a cool voice. “On the list, there was no Burst Linker name determined to be an Acceleration Research Society member.”

He felt like he heard a deep sigh from his right. But before he could turn his gaze in that direction, the Purple King was crying out in a thorny voice.

“What? So the mission was a massive failure?! And you went out of your way to call us all here just to report that?!” She raised the Arc Tempest and slammed it into the ground. Tiny sparks crawled along the floor after its resounding *clang!*

Keenly feeling Purple Thorn’s rage and perhaps disappointment, Haruyuki stared at Ivory Tower sitting across from him all alone. His avatar was indeed the white tower suggested by his name, and he remained silent even as he heard the report of the mission’s failure. Not so much as a hint of relief or unease was communicated from his faintly patterned face mask.

The Purple King glanced at Ivory before speaking again. “And Lotus, you’ve been hedging yourself by saying ‘the area,’ but if we look at the territory map, it becomes immediately obvious where you attacked. In a single day, the areas of Shibuya One and Two and Minato Three became Negabu territory, so clearly, your true objective was Minato Three, the farthest from Suginami. Which is to say that you believed Oscillatory was the parent group for the Acceleration Research Society. So come out with it then and interrogate their full proxy.”

“If he would simply acknowledge it when interrogated, I would have done that to start,” Kuroyukihime replied with a wry grin. “It is precisely because my conviction is insufficient that we begged the assistance of GW and had observers from Leo in order to get definitive proof. But that strategy failed. Or to be more precise, the strategy was found out in advance. I admit that in the information war, it was Oscillatory’s win from the very beginning.”

Ivory Tower moved for the first time. Slipping both hands out from under his elephant-tusk robe, he turned his palms upward, and a smooth and yet utterly characterless voice flowed out into the arena.

“This line of inquiry is indeed upsetting. We responded in desperation to the sudden territory attack by the joint team of Nega Nebulus and Prominence, but our strength was insufficient and we were defeated. If we had known about it in advance, we would have been able to strengthen our defenses.”

“I find it extremely hard to believe that your defenses could be considered weak when you had four of the Seven Dwarves on the defending team, including yourself,” Kuroyukihime noted.

The white-robed magician simply shrugged.

“My,” Purple Thorn said. “You won against four of the Dwarves? I would like to hear the details of that.”

“I’m happy to tell them, but I don’t think you’ll believe me,” Kuroyukihime told her.

Haruyuki added his silent agreement, deep in his own heart. A special Incarnate technique changing the field from the Territories to the Unlimited Neutral Field, not to mention Devil-class Enemies running rampant in the Hell stage—if anyone had told him such a story, he would never have believed it

himself.

But Ivory Tower spoke again, as if refusing to allow Kuroyukihime to say anything more. “No matter how many of the Seven Dwarves were present, you can see from the result that our defense was surpassed by their offense; that is the fact of the matter. We in Oscillatory Universe have currently had Minato Area Three, our critical base, taken from us by Nega Nebulus, preventing our global connection and greatly inconveniencing all our Legion members. Not to mention, naturally, there was not a single Society member on the matching list. This Territories attack, carried out with this baseless conviction that we were the parent organization for the Acceleration Research Society, is clearly a violation of the mutual nonaggression pact. Oscillatory Universe demands from Nega Nebulus the immediate return of our territory and commensurate compensation.”

At Ivory Tower’s—the Restrainer Black Vise’s—brazen and unscrupulous declaration, Haruyuki felt the virtual blood flowing through his avatar grow hot once again. If he hadn’t known about their own trump card, he might have lashed out.

Instead, he clenched his hands into fists to ride it out, and Kuroyukihime spoke, her voice cool as ever.

“I will tell you now, Ivory Tower. We have never been a part of any mutual nonaggression pact. In fact, Leo and GW attack our territory on a near-weekly basis.”

“That is simply sport to train middle rankers and lower members. In point of fact, Nega Nebulus has never once had its Suginami area taken,” Ivory returned immediately, and looked around at the entire party through the now-narrow slits of his eye lenses. “But this attack was most certainly not sport. If you will not return our territory and compensate us appropriately, and if the other Legions remain silent on this matter, then we will consider the mutual nonaggression pact broken. Is this acceptable to you?”

“Hmm. Am I to take that to mean you will attack us in Aurora Oval given that our territory is adjacent?” the Purple King challenged.

The magician bowed courteously. “If that is your wish, Empress Voltage, at

any time.”

“You!” Aster Vine roared, without a moment’s delay. “A mere proxy would do best to watch his words!”

But Ivory showed no sign of being moved. That fathomless ease and the information pressure on par with the kings were as mysterious as ever, but now that Haruyuki knew his true identity, it only made sense. Black Vise had been active behind the scenes since the dawn of Brain Burst, the age of the Originators before the Seven Kings of Pure Color rose to prominence, the consummate villain from the beginning of time.

“Well, don’t rush on ahead, Ivory Tower,” the Blue King said, easing the tension in the room. His heavy armor creaking, he spread his hands out before him. “We’re still only in the middle of Lotus’s report, yes? Can’t we discuss returns and compensation once we hear it to the end?”

“If you wish, Blue King. Although given that the mission or what have you was completely misdirected, I believe the conclusion is obvious.” Ivory reseated himself without a sound.

At Blue Knight’s signal, Kuroyukihime hovered forward.

At last.

Haruyuki wanted to turn around and offer Shihoko some encouragement, but he forced himself to stay put. He couldn’t do anything that might make Ivory Tower anticipate the existence of a trump card before they hit him with it. Even so, he shifted just five millimeters toward Shihoko and tried to communicate his intent to protect her no matter what happened as he focused in order not to miss a single word Kuroyukihime spoke.

“Yes. We lost the information war several hours or more before the Territories started.” There was no doubt she was talking about Megumi Wakamiya, whose memories as a Burst Linker had returned suddenly after school the day before. But Kuroyukihime continued as cool as ever.

“The situation changed at a dizzying speed, and we continued to fight desperately although toyed with by forces we did not understand. As a result, we just barely managed a victory in the Territories itself, but in practical terms,

we lost. Because when Dualis checked the matching list, there were no Society member names. However...However. Leading the defense team, Ivory Tower, you made one very modest but extremely critical oversight. Well, I suppose I wouldn't notice a lone and tiny red light in that situation, either."

"Oversight? Red light?" Ivory Tower had to have at least sensed that the Black King was approaching the heart of the matter and yet his attitude hadn't changed in the slightest. Cemented to his seat like a tiny white tower, he sought further explanation.

After staring at him for a second or so, Kuroyukihime turned, using her right sword leg as an axle, and sent a signal to her rear.

Tak! The hard sound of a footstep. Stepping out onto the metal floor in her chocolate-colored high heels, Chocolat Puppeteer passed between Haruyuki and Leopard to come toward the center of the circle. Most likely the lowest-level Linker in the venue, Chocolat—Shihoko Nago—showed no signs of hesitation, however, as she came to stand next to Kuroyukihime and spread a hand out, bending at the waist for an elegant bow.

"Hello. My name is Chocolat Puppeteer and I am a member of Nega Nebulus." After introducing herself in a voice that carried, she turned to her left and looked at the three members of the Blue Legion. "I have a request of the two starters. I would ask that you please change me to a dueler."

Instantly, a buzz raced through the arena.

In the normal duel field, there were two ways to turn a spectator into a dueler. One was a change to Battle Royale mode, which required the agreement of all Gallery members. The other was a continuous duel in which, once the duel was over, the winner (or either dueler in the event of a draw) went on to challenge one of the spectators. Neither actually happened that often, but because the number of victories was displayed for a continuous duel, brave warriors would tackle the challenge of taking out Burst Linkers. There was also the limited Battle Royale mode, in which only spectators invited by the duelers could participate, but there were many constraints like the number of consumed points and the amount of duel time, so this mode was generally not activated without a fairly significant reason.

At a meeting of the Seven Kings, naturally, a change to Battle Royale mode was unthinkable, which meant that the only other option was a continuous duel. At this sudden request, the two members of the Dualis exchanged a glance before older sister Cobalt Blade asked after Chocolat's intent.

"You don't want to fight us, right?"

"N-no, of course not. I need to show you a certain object, but members of the Gallery are not permitted to use items." Given that this was her first meeting of the Seven Kings, the fact that Shihoko managed to speak in her usual proper way was, in a word, a splendid display of her courage.

It wasn't clear whether or not Cobalt and her sister also approved of this determination, but after looking at each other once more, the sisters flicked open their Instruct menus.

The word DRAW flared to life in Haruyuki's field of view. The draw did not stop the timer with just under fifteen minutes remaining, but when Cobalt moved her finger again, the name of the new duel opponent—CHOCOLAT PUPPETER—was displayed in the top right of his view, and the timer returned to 1,800 seconds.

With this, Shihoko was now the main actor in this meeting in both name and substance. Although she faced immense scrutiny under the combined gazes of the four—well, three kings since the Yellow King had vanished—along with the eyes of the high rankers who worked as their close aides, Shihoko simply took a deep breath and stood taller.

"Chocolat Puppeteer, you are now a dueler just as you wished. Are you going to show us something worth the extra point I had to spend?" Manganese Blade asked.

Shihoko nodded firmly and operated her own Instruct menu to pull out a single small card that was a rich gray in color.

Several times more nervous than when he flared up at the Yellow King earlier, Haruyuki stared intently at Shihoko.

"Corvus," Fuko murmured from his side, at the lowest volume possible. "Eyes on Ivory, not Choco."

She was exactly right. He already knew what Shihoko was going to do, so he

should have been watching for Ivory Tower's reaction. Tower was also still part of the Gallery, meaning he wouldn't be able to interfere, but when it came to this mysterious avatar, it was honestly impossible to know what he would do next.

Haruyuki stared at Ivory sitting quietly, not moving a muscle, while out of the corner of his eye, Shihoko brandished the gray card high above her head.

"This is a replay card I recorded in the final stages of the Territories yesterday. As I'm sure you are all well aware, it is impossible to edit or alter a Brain Burst replay card in any fashion. This recording faithfully depicts the sequence of events we witnessed," Shihoko announced, and then tapped the center of the card with her index finger.

A shining crimson triangle floated up and projected a cone of light upward. The light nearly reached the ceiling of the Budokan, and inside that cone, something enormous writhed.

The instant the image became clear, murmured exclamations filled the arena. It was a giant with two eyes like burning embers and twisting spiral horns. Displayed above its head was a four-level health gauge.

"A-an Enemy in the Territories?!" Was it Cobalt or Manga who cried out?

"And that's a Devil class," Iron Pound groaned. "A Hell stage?!"

Haruyuki's eyes threatened to get sucked into the video, but he forced himself to stay focused on the south side of the arena. Ivory still wasn't moving, though.

This white tower avatar also showed up in the video. Riding on the left shoulder of the massive Devil-class Enemy was none other than the full proxy of the White King, the fourth of the Seven Dwarves, Ivory Tower.

"Hang on...What is the meaning of this?!" Finally, even the Purple King cried out sharply. "You tamed a Devil-class Enemy and brought it into the Territories?! How would you—?"

"Wait, Thorn," the Blue King interjected. "Watch the video."

Then outside the frame of the video, there came the call of a technique name

that sounded like spitting blood.

“Bloodshed Cannon!!”

Transformed into a beast, Blood Leopard became a bullet shining with crimson light and charged forward at Ivory Tower on the devil’s shoulder. Even in the video, it was clear that this special attack was immensely powerful, enough to put the life of the attacker herself on the line. If Leopard’s charge made a direct hit, the target wouldn’t be able to avoid instant death, but Ivory Tower was casual as he turned his left hand toward it.

The creamy armor of the slender arm grew dark, a change accompanied by a new technique call: *“Layered Armor.”*

Ivory’s arm transformed into ten thin panels that lined up along the trajectory of the bullet Leopard. The crush of destruction shaking the air, seven and then eight of the thin panels were smashed to pieces, but there Leopard’s charge stopped.

She plummeted like a stone, while Ivory Tower began to transform beyond her. An inky matte black, the darkness of night itself, washed over his body, and his tower form was sliced into countless thin panels arranged together like radiation fins, the merest hint of a gap between them. The head also turned into a collection of panels, with nothing of the face mask of other duel avatars.

From this faceless face came a voice that was utterly different in both timbre and tone from Ivory Tower’s. *“My goodness. And I was planning to hide from you, even submitting to dying alongside you repeatedly in Brinicle.”*

“You...Black Vise!!” Black Lotus shouted ferociously from the left side of the frame. *“So Ivory Tower is your true identity!!”*

Now the meeting venue was awash in gasps and stunned whispers. The Purple King, the Blue King, and even the Green King, Green Grandé, stood up from their chairs. The only one who remained firmly seated was the newly exposed Ivory Tower.

“Now, now.” In the video, Black Vise shrugged nonchalantly. *“Why would you think that? The opposite is just as possible.”*

“No, it’s not. Because the system has never once displayed the avatar name

Black Vise. That name is nothing more than what you call yourself!!

"I see, I see. So you won't forgive the doubling of the black color? Quite rude, hmm?"

"Heh-heh-heh."

"But, well, since it's come to this, it seems I'll have no choice but to also have you retire from the Accelerated World, Black King," the layered black avatar stated decisively. *"I shall gladly take on the vacated black color name."*

Here the video stopped. Shihoko had paused the replay card she still brandished. "Up until the moment before I started recording this video, I was prepared to lose all my points."

The eyes of the kings and their aides turned toward the small princess avatar again.

"But my...precious friend said she would protect us. So I tried to think of at least one thing that I could do, too, and I ended up recording this replay. Ivory Tower." Still tightly gripping the card, Shihoko turned to him. "You're likely wondering why you didn't notice the light of the card. During recording, the circular mark shines bright red, after all. But this light was lost in the Incarnate overlay of the friend who said she would protect us. The shining heart of a middle ranker you ignored as not worthy of your time dazzled your eyes..."

Haruyuki had thought that the friend Shihoko was referring to was either Plum Flipper (Yume Yuruki) or Mint Mitten (Satomi Mito), but he quickly realized it was neither of them. The "us" she mentioned had to have been the three-person group of Petit Paquet. In which case, the one who tried to protect them had to have been Rui Odagiri—Magenta Scissor.

Rui had at one point tried to parasitize Shihoko and her friends with ISS kits, but now she wanted to protect them, with a resolve that even generated an overlay, and that light had hidden the recording mark of the replay card from the eyes of Ivory Tower. In other words, Ivory had had his feet knocked out from under him by a bond born from the ISS kits that he himself had dispersed.

After the meeting members had gotten a good look at the temporarily frozen Black Vise, Shihoko ended the replay.

The first to open their mouth was the Submaster of Aurora Oval, Aster Vine. “That bizarre form...I could never forget it. I saw him very clearly with these very eyes from the Gallery of the Hermes’ Cord race. He was riding in the shuttle with that Acceleration Research Society terrorist, the one who made a total mess of the race, Rust Jigsaw. The black avatar that disappeared in the shadows, Black Vise. Ivory Tower. To think that you were Black Vise all along!!”

In a motion that seemed unconscious, she took the whip from her waist and snapped it fiercely at the metal floor. *Shwk!*

“I remember each and every word that’s come out of your mouth at the meetings of the Seven Kings so far. Last time, you said that unlike Aurora Oval, Oscillatory didn’t insist on control in the Unlimited Neutral Field, and thus you were under no obligation to dispose of the ISS kit main body inside Oscillatory territory. Impressive that you could spit out such a bald-faced lie...when it was you yourself who set the kit main body in Tokyo Midtown Tower and the Archangel Metatron to guard it!!” As if overwhelmed by her indignation, Aster yanked her whip from side to side as hard as she could with both hands.

Then Cobalt Blade stepped forward with a force that nearly flipped her pigtails up on end. “Black Vise. You will pay now at last for the countless catastrophes that you have brought about in the Accelerated World! At this stage, I will not allow you to refuse to become our next duel opponent!”

She drew the sword on her left hip and turned the sharply glittering tip toward Ivory Tower. Now a member of the Gallery, Manganese Blade came to stand next to her older sister, hand on the hilt of her own sword.

Her fighting spirit boiling over, Cobalt Blade moved to open her Instruct menu to change her duel opponent.

“Wait, Dualis.”

The sonorous voice holding the sisters in check was not that of the Blue King but the Green, who had maintained his silence as always right from the start of the meeting.

Haruyuki unconsciously nearly shrieked *He spoke?!* but managed to hold the yelp in somehow.

He couldn't get any kind of read on what was in the heart of the king towering above them like a massive green statue, but there was nowhere near the level of shock and indignation in the eye lenses of Iron Pound and Suntan Chafer behind him as there was with Vine and the Coba-Manga sisters. When the two Legions had negotiated the return of Nega Nebulus's territory a week earlier, the Black King had informed them that Oscillatory Universe was pulling the strings on the Acceleration Research Society, so perhaps for the members of the Green Legion, they were more resigned than shocked at having this suspicion confirmed.

Carrying one of the Arcs, the cross-shield Strife, the Green King turned his entire body toward Ivory Tower, who still sat quietly about five meters to the king's right, and brought the bottom of his great shield down heavily onto the ground.

"That the physical evidence myself and Dual Sword could not obtain even after hundreds of years was captured in the span of a single territory battle shows uncharacteristic carelessness, hmm, Restrainer?"

Even called by Black Vise's nickname, Ivory Tower showed absolutely no reaction. Almost as though he had become an actual tower, he didn't so much as twitch.

But the Green King continued evenly, "We vowed to the Black King that when it was proven that the Acceleration Research Society and Oscillatory Universe were one and the same, we would attack White. I judge the earlier replay video to be more than sufficient to serve as that evidence. Would any argue differently?"

There came an aura of a gasp from previously indignant Aster Vine and the sisters Cobalt and Manga. This was how definitive the Green King's statement was.

In the silence strained to the limit, Ivory Tower finally spoke. "I remember, you know, Green King."

Without awaiting a reply, he continued in a voice that was as level as ever, not changing in the slightest even in this situation.

"Immediately after the annihilation of the first Nega Nebulus, Oscillatory

Universe attempted to annex Shibuya Areas One and Two. They were essential locations in our plan. But right before what should have been an essentially bloodless handover in the Territories, you conducted secret negotiations with the Black King and slipped through a gap in the system to obtain the Shibuya areas. That forced our road map back by over a year...Ever since, I've thought that we would likely come up against you someday, but that day has come surprisingly early."

His words were equivalent to admitting that he was Black Vise. But Haruyuki's interest was piqued by something else Ivory had said.

"Essential...locations...?" he muttered.

Given that the center of Shibuya No. 1 was the Harajuku region and the center of No. 2 was Shibuya Ravine Square with JR Shibuya Station at its core, both were famed tourist areas in Tokyo and popular duel spots. But he couldn't remember there being anything important there, system-wise.

"I think it's probably Yoyogi Park," Fuko whispered.

"Huh? What's in Yoyogi Park?"

But before she could answer him, the Blue King started to walk to the south, his armor creaking. The Purple King also moved; her pin heels sharp like needles clacking against the floor. They both came to a stop about five meters away from Ivory, just like the Green King.

"At the last meeting, we adopted the Red King's proposal," Blue Knight began. "We agreed that we would immediately put together a joint team from all seven Legions and carry out a concentrated attack at the point in time when the base of the Acceleration Research Society became clear. We would have as many high-level members as possible take part in the attack. You also agreed to this proposal, Ivory Tower."

Purple Thorn also spoke, her words essentially devoid of emotion, which made them all the weightier. "We have determined that you, the full proxy for the White King, are Black Vise, and that the Acceleration Research Society and Oscillatory Universe are one and the same. I don't suppose Radio, wherever he's hiding, would argue this point. Thus, once this meeting is concluded, the seven— No, Oscillatory is no longer included, and Promi has merged with

Negabu. The five Legions will commence a joint attack on Minato Areas One, Two, and Three. If we find any members of Oscillatory on the matching list, we will continue to charge them until they have been driven to total point loss. Moreover, in the next Territories, we will also attack Minato One and Two and strip you of your control.”

“In practical terms, this means that the mutual nonaggression treaty with Oscillatory is null and void.” Blue Knight spoke once more. “So naturally, we won’t object if you come to attack us. But...before the concentrated attack begins, I would like to at least warn the members of Oscillatory. If they leave the Legion, they will not be the target of our attack, even if their name should come up on the matching list. Unfortunately, that caveat excludes all members of the Acceleration Research Society, including you. I want you to communicate this warning to your Legion members. Will you do that?”

Ivory Tower silently took in what could have been seen as a final mercy on the part of the three Kings.

“Quick and slipshod before slow and careful,” he said finally.

“What?” the Blue King asked.

“It’s an old saying. It means if your work is skillful but measured, it will inevitably fall short of sloppy but fast. I’ve always thought that this admonishment did not apply in the Accelerated World where time is very nearly infinite. I believed you could take as much time as you wanted, that it was best to proceed slowly so you made no omissions or blunders. That’s why it’s taken seven years in the real world to get to this place. Seven years since I learned of the dark side of the Incarnate System...of that tremendous power.”

Blue Knight and Purple Thorn looked slightly confused by Ivory Tower’s monologue, but Haruyuki understood it so well it hurt.

The Acceleration Research Society’s plot was entirely and intimately bound to negative Incarnate. It went without saying that the Armor of Catastrophe Chrome Disaster had been bound to it, but the Hermes’ Cord attack, the ISS kits, and perhaps even the backdoor program Takumu had taken advantage of all called up, used, and amplified the power of negative Incarnate.

And the Society currently had the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, in their

hands, perhaps the culmination of their plans. He still didn't know what the group—no, what Ivory Tower and the White King—were going to do with it. But if Nega Nebulus and the other Legions didn't do something, they would bring about an even greater catastrophe in the Accelerated World; that much was certain.

Which was why no matter how merciless a general attack on the White Legion was, they had no choice but to go through with it. All Haruyuki could do was pray that as many Legion members as possible came to realize the cruelty of the White King like Rose Milady had and heed the warning to leave the White Legion.

“Your seven years were on the wrong course right from the moment you set out,” Kuroyukihime proclaimed, still standing alongside Niko. “There is a great power in the dark side of the Incarnate. Any middle ranker in their first minutes of Incarnate System training knows that. As well as the fact that all that lies ahead is destruction once you are consumed by the darkness. And indeed, the Armor of Catastrophe and ISS kits you made have brought about irreparable tragedy in exchange for fleeting power. In an instant, you destroyed the bonds, friendship, and love cultivated over great time. What significance do you mean to say there is in pursuit of such power?!” Her question was replete with a deep anger, misery, and sadness.

“My, my.” Ivory Tower pulled his hands out from inside his robe and spread them out theatrically. “The only reason the young ones know the fearsomeness of the dark side of Incarnate is because that is what their instructors teach them. And the only reason those instructors know that is because there have been people who pursued the power of the dark side, yes? I am referring to us, of course. Black King, we have been painfully aware of the points you mention for the last seven years—no, since before the appearance of this Accelerated World. Even so, we have chosen to walk this path.”

“In that case...it's unavoidable now, hmm?” Kuroyukihime also finally stepped forward. She hovered to the side of Chocolat Puppeteer, still holding the replay card in the center of the arena, and patted her shoulder as if to applaud her work. A moment later, she continued her advance.

“Our paths have crossed any number of times before, and yesterday, they

finally became one. Now our only choice is to fight until one path or the other is permanently severed. It's too bad Cosmos isn't here. Tell her for me: Next time, we meet in the duel field."

"Heh-heh, you're impatient as ever." Ivory Tower chuckled, and when he continued, his tone sounded somehow earnest. "I have been nothing but exasperated by your quick-and-dirty way, but this incident made me realize that just as the saying has it, quick and dirty can beat slow and methodical in the Accelerated World as well. Aah, it is a delight and a surprise that there is still something for me to learn after so much time has passed here."

Haruyuki realized that at some point, Ivory Tower's level and courteous tone had changed into Black Vise's somehow teacherly voice. He felt a charged shiver at the base of his neck, but nothing could happen here. This was the normal duel field, and Ivory Tower was a powerless spectator.

The ivory magician stood up in a ghostly motion that made his avatar appear weightless and looked at the four Kings lined up a mere five meters from him. Eventually, he turned his face mask back to the Black King.

"It would be odd perhaps to thank you, so I will tell you something you do not know."

"What *now*—?" Purple Thorn was about to step forward, but he checked her with a hand and then pointed up with his index finger.

"Listen. As you well know, members of the Gallery cannot use special attacks or abilities. But every now and then exceptions to the rules of the Accelerated World are generated. Especially when the Incarnate System is involved. That said, of course, you can't use any flashy attack-type Incarnate techniques, but there are instances when you can manifest results even as a member of the Gallery. Just two, in fact—the Incarnate-enhanced ability to interfere with perception or to interfere with the system directly. Radio disappeared earlier, did he not? A perfect example of this."

"Oi, oi, that's common knowledge among high rankers." Blue Knight sounded exasperated. "People generally don't use those abilities, though, because it's a violation of etiquette."

"Common knowledge, hmm?" Ivory Tower calmly continued his lecture.

“Then you must start by questioning that common knowledge, Knight. After all, not a single one of you noticed. Not even Grandé.”

“Noticed? Noticed what then?”

“Him. Or perhaps I should say ‘her,’ now.” Ivory Tower glided to the right.

And then Haruyuki saw it. A nineteenth duel avatar behind Ivory, standing quietly in the gloom of the arena wall. A sharp silhouette with straight lines. On the smallish side, but with large hands and feet, so the overall effect was far from slender. The most distinctive feature was the shoulder armor jutting out to either side.

“...*You*,” Haruyuki murmured in a hoarse voice as he stepped forward.

“Ridiculous...Impossible!” Cobalt Blade shouted, dumbfounded, flying to Chocolat’s side. “I checked the number of people on the spectator list twice!”

“She was on the list, though,” Ivory Tower responded. “It’s just that you weren’t able to perceive the name of the nineteenth person. That is the true power of my Undercover ability. Now...It’s your turn.”

He brandished his left hand and snapped his fingers. At this signal, the avatar by the wall began to walk. Heavy footsteps echoed through the large arena, metal against metal.

A member of the Gallery had used an ability to keep them from seeing a name on the spectator list, a part of the BB system itself. Haruyuki couldn’t believe it was actually possible.

However.

In the middle of the previous month, at the first meeting of the Seven Kings that year held to discuss the handling of Rust Jigsaw and his disruption of the Hermes’ Cord race, Haruyuki had had a very similar experience.

Six kings had sat on the seven chairs that had been prepared, and they were left to wait for the last person. But Haruyuki hadn’t actually noticed when the seventh chair had been filled. He remembered being surprised when he happened to glance over at the empty chair, and suddenly an inconspicuous avatar was sitting there quietly. That avatar had been Ivory Tower. He’d

activated his Undercover ability as part of the Gallery to deceive not only Haruyuki but even the kings.

The power to make oneself so unobtrusive that no one could perceive you seemed boring at first glance, but when he really thought about it, it was much more terrifying than the Shadow Lurker ability Black Vise and his student Shadow Cloaker used. The target was other duel avatars...and the fact that it could affect even the system display made it all the more frightening.

Sending his thoughts racing along at top speed, Haruyuki stared into the southern edge of the arena, unable to even breathe, as the nineteenth person at last stepped out from the gloom beneath the stadium seating.

Matte-gray metal armor textured like striping slashes. Face mask reminiscent of a wolf with its maw closed. The same motif on the shoulder armor.

Wolfram Cerberus...

A duel genius, he had an absolutely insurmountable defense in his superhard tungsten armor and Physical Immune ability, and combined this with a fighting style that amazed even high rankers. He was also a precious friend Haruyuki had encountered, exchanged blows with, and formed a real bond with in the Accelerated World.

“Cerberus...” Calling his friend’s name in a hoarse voice, Haruyuki took a step and then another forward. But Cerberus didn’t respond in any way; the fangs on the top and bottom of his visor remained firmly closed.

The first time Haruyuki had encountered Wolfram Cerberus and dueled at his request had been about a month earlier, the evening of June 25. At the time, Haruyuki had been forced to bow to the other avatar’s brilliance as he was immediately struck down in a crushing defeat. They had a rematch the following day, and he’d narrowly taken the victory with a fighting style made up mainly of Kuroyukihime’s Way of the Flexible and throwing techniques. And then on the twenty-seventh, Haruyuki tackled Cerberus a third time in a Battle Royale, but Argon Array, an executive member of the Acceleration Research Society, had barged in and victory had slipped through his fingers. Then, right after the battle, Haruyuki had faced Cerberus for just a moment in the real world.

He had turned toward the boy his age, who was standing there stock-still, and called out to him with the thought, *I want to be your friend*. The boy had quickly run away, but even so, Haruyuki had believed that if they kept on piling on the duels until they couldn't even count how many they'd fought, they would be able to become real friends one day.

Three days later, on June 30, when Haruyuki and his friends marched into the headquarters of the Acceleration Research Society, Cerberus had appeared again in an entirely unexpected form. Gone was the friendly rival Haruyuki wanted, someone to simply enjoy the duel with no fetters or restraints; instead, the wolf avatar had been equipped with the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, produced by the Acceleration Research Society.

With the help of his Legion comrades and Metatron, Haruyuki had just barely succeeded in rendering Mark II powerless, and they had attempted to disassemble Scarlet Rain's Enhanced Armament, which had been turned into the Armor's vessel, with Chiyuri's Citron Call. But before they could take back the last part of the Armament, Cerberus vanished from where he lay on the ground.

From that time until this moment, Haruyuki had worried about Cerberus, but not only had he not seen him again, he hadn't even been able to find out where the other player was. So meeting him here and now, despite the unhappy circumstances, should have made Haruyuki dance with joy, if only because it was proof that Cerberus had avoided total point loss and remained a Burst Linker after having been reduced to a balance of just ten Burst Points.

But he had only taken two steps forward when he found himself unable to move any farther, as though his feet had been nailed to the floor. In the core of his being, he felt a sense of dreadful anticipation more ominous than when they had been locked inside Glacier Behemoth's Last Glacial Period with Snow Fairy's Brinicle closing in on them the day before in the Territories. It was such a cold shiver of fear that it threatened to knock him into a helpless Zero Fill state if he let it.

Stepping into the meeting venue on unsteady feet, Wolfram Cerberus stopped behind Ivory Tower. His face mask remained dark, and he showed no sign of speaking. On his back were four new protrusions of various sizes,

illuminated by the weak light coming in through the roof of the dome. The Invincible thrusters stolen from the Red King had likely changed shape and color to match the design of Cerberus's avatar.

Taking back those thrusters and freeing Cerberus from his multiple binds was one reason Haruyuki was fighting the Acceleration Research Society. The chance might have been presenting itself at that very moment, so this was no time for him to be frozen in fear. And yet he couldn't make his feet move, clench his hands into fists, or even open his mouth. There was no reason for him to be this afraid, though, no matter how strange Cerberus seemed.

"I'll admit that your inconspicuousness is a powerful ability, Ivory. But what do you mean to accomplish using the power to hide someone else in the Gallery? You just said so yourself. That the only abilities the Gallery can use are harmless things to deceive the eyes and ears of others." Blue Knight gave voice to Haruyuki's own thoughts.

Wolfram Cerberus was at best an observer there. With no health gauge and unable to carry out physical attacks, he also couldn't use special attacks. And as far as Haruyuki knew, being a pure fighter type, Cerberus didn't have any abilities that could mess with anyone's perceptions. It would have been a different story if everyone in the venue agreed to change to Battle Royale mode, but there was absolutely no way that would happen. And anyway, the only ones with the right to put forward a request to change the mode were the current duelers, Cobalt Blade and Chocolat Puppeteer. What exactly was Ivory Tower planning to do?

Without waiting for Ivory's reply, Blue Knight raised a hand and signaled Cobalt Blade to his rear. "Cobal, you can see the names on the spectator list now. Just in case, force this metal color to leave the venue."

"...Yes, sir." Cobalt opened her Instruct menu.

For a split second, Haruyuki, Fuko, Chiyuri, Niko, Aster Vine, Iron Pound, and the other kings turned their attention to Cobalt Blade.

"Cerberus III, activate," Ivory Tower said, his voice low and smooth.

Kshak! The armor of Cerberus's right shoulder opened along the zigzag joint, and a vivid light gushed out of the gap.

In the battle at the Society's headquarters, Haruyuki had heard the exact same command from the mouth of Argon Array. Then, too, the right shoulder armor had opened and the third personality living in Cerberus's avatar—a copy of the marauder Dusk Taker—had appeared.

Is he going to show up again? Haruyuki held his breath. But the light coming from the armor opening was not the rich purple of Dusk Taker's overlay, but a light peach reminiscent of dawn in early spring. A color he had seen somewhere very recently...

"It can't be!" Kuroyukihime cried, facing off against Ivory Tower together with the other three kings.

At the same time, Cerberus's right shoulder called out the technique name in a voice that was sweet and clear but also sad and empty somehow.

"Paradigm Breakdown."

A pale pink radiance grew to an incredible intensity, dyeing Haruyuki's field of view a single color.

There are instances when you can manifest results even as a member of the Gallery. Just two, in fact—the Incarnate-enhanced ability to interfere with perception or...to interfere with the system directly.

Ivory Tower's words from mere minutes earlier echoed in the back of Haruyuki's mind as he was swallowed up by the light.

The ability to interfere with the system directly. Haruyuki had taken that to be just a different way of saying "overwriting," the fundamental principle behind all Incarnate techniques, and carelessly let it slide. But if Tower had meant direct interference as in transforming the very rules of Brain Burst, then there weren't too many avatars with an ability like that. As far as he knew, in fact, there were only two Burst Linkers powerful enough to bend the rules of the world itself.

One could rewind the time and status of the target avatar and make it as though any phenomenon—for instance, your torso being severed in two—had never happened. The Watch Witch, Lime Bell.

And the other was, in a certain sense, as powerful as a god, able to force the Change to occur or switch the normal duel field into the Unlimited Neutral Field. The Prophet Orchid Oracle.

He didn't know why this was happening. None of it made sense yet. The one thing that was certain, however, was that Wolfram Cerberus's right shoulder, which should have housed the personality copy of Dusk Taker, was now occupied by Orchid Oracle's personality, and that at Ivory Tower's command, she had activated her Incarnate technique Paradigm Breakdown.

In other words, this place was no longer the normal duel field, and Haruyuki

and Black Lotus were no longer safe spectators. They were in the Unlimited Neutral Field now.

The pale peach light became a wall that closed in on them and swallowed up their avatars.

The instant he broke through it, Haruyuki shook away his fear and anxiety. “Master, take Bell and Choco and retreat to the outside! I’ll take care of Kuroyukihime!”

At first sight, there was no change to the interior of the Purgatory stage Budokan arena after the wall of light pushed past them. But in the Territories the previous day, while they had still been unable to get a handle on what was going on, Glacier Behemoth had locked them up with his Incarnate technique while Snow Fairy’s had annihilated them. Whatever else they did, they couldn’t stay in such a closed-in space.

“I’m on it!” Fuko replied, without the slightest delay.

Her wheelchair tires squealed against the metal floor, sending sparks flying as she did a back dash. She wrapped one arm around Chiyuri behind her and then shot forward to collect Chocolat Puppeteer, frozen in place in the center of the arena.

“Pard, get Rain!” Haruyuki shouted, but Blood Leopard was already dancing through the air. Somersaulting, she transformed to Beast Mode and had no sooner landed than she was scooping Niko up onto her back.

“Hey, hang on here. I’m gonna—” Niko cried, but Pard held her in place with her tail as she raced toward the exit. Fuko chased after them with Chiyuri in her right arm and Shihoko in her left.

He had only just been thrown into the Unlimited Neutral Field, so while the health gauge displayed in the upper left of his field of view was full, his special-attack gauge was still empty—but he didn’t exactly have the luxury of destroying some objects to charge it up.

So watching his comrades retreat at top speed out of the corner of his eye, Haruyuki mustered his imagination.

“Light Speed!!” A silver overlay gushed from the wings spread out on his back.

The technique was not as stable as his Laser Sword, but perhaps his still-vivid memory of the previous day's life-and-death struggle was an aid in his focus—the light wings snapped out and Haruyuki shot forward.

On the south side of the arena, the Blue and Purple Kings were whirling their heads to take in their surroundings, each with their Arc readied; and the Green King brandished his shield above his head, perhaps having sensed something coming; while the Black King remained still, her eye lenses locked on Wolfram Cerberus.

“Hurry! Outside!” As he flew toward his swordmaster, Haruyuki shouted to the other members of the meeting—Cobalt Blade and Manganese Blade on his left, Aster Vine, Iron Pound, Suntan Chafer, and Lemon Pierrette on his right, the latter looking unsure about what to do given that the Yellow King was still nowhere to be seen.

Up ahead, the white robes of the magician Ivory Tower melted from him into thin black panels. Wolfram Cerberus, next to him, showed absolutely no sign of movement, only a pale peach afterglow shining around her right shoulder armor.

How on earth had the personality of Orchid Oracle/Megumi Wakamiya come to live in Cerberus III? What had happened to number one, supposedly the main personality? And where was Megumi herself, after no one had been able to get ahold of her since the previous day?

He didn't know the answer to any of these questions. But his instincts were sounding every alarm, yelling that he couldn't stay here, whether he knew what was happening or not.

“Kuroyukihime!” Haruyuki wrapped an arm around her slender waist and with his other arm, he reflexively took a firm hold of the nearby Purple King, Purple Thorn.

“Aah! Just—what are you doing?!” Thorn cried out.

“No, Crow,” Kuroyukihime said hoarsely. “I have to help O—”

“Escape's top priority right now!” Haruyuki was also worried about Cerberus/Oracle, so much so that it threatened to rip him apart, but most likely,

even this feeling was part of Ivory's—no, Black Vise's trap.

Clutching the kings even more tightly to him, Haruyuki ascended abruptly, aiming for the Budokan ceiling. "Please smash the roof!" he yelled.

Before Black Lotus could react, her heart apparently still with Oracle, the Purple King raised her staff.

"Haven't left me much of a choice, have you?" Cursing bitterly, she brought the staff down, aiming it toward the center of the ceiling. Even though her special-attack gauge had to have been just as empty as Haruyuki's, a bolt of pale blue lightning shot out from the Tempest and ripped a large hole in the metal above them, causing the air to shake like a massive tree had been felled.

Aiming for the ashy sky he could see on the other side of the hole, Haruyuki mustered up every last drop of his mental strength and flew.

A mere second after he had flown out of the improvised doorway to the heavens, a light so dazzling it threatened to blind him poured down from somewhere in the cluster of skyscrapers in Kudanshita on the east side of the Budokan. An unbelievably enormous laser beam cloaked in a reddish-purple plasma. Not Cerberus nor Black Vise but a third enemy was attacking.

It might not have been more powerful than Metatron's Trisagion, but there was no way that a bundle of light this massive could have been a regular special attack. It passed by the rapidly ascending Haruyuki and his charges so close that it nearly grazed his toes before piercing the sprawling roof of the Budokan.

An instant of silence.

Decelerating as he looked back, Haruyuki saw a massive fireball swelling up, and the roof and walls of the metal arena were melting like butter. A huge explosion that threatened to destroy space-time itself.

Unconsciously turning his face away from the heat wave that pushed up to the altitude where they hovered, Haruyuki shuddered violently. If their escape had been three seconds later, he wouldn't have had the chance to activate his Optical Conduction ability before they were swallowed up in the blast, and even the metal color Silver Crow would have died instantly. A transcendent single blow on the same level as Snow Fairy's Brinicle—though, considering the speed

of the laser's arrival, it was at least a step or two up from that fearsome technique. He had no doubt that this Incarnate technique was stage two or higher.

Had Fuko, Niko, Cobalt, Manganese, and the others managed to make it out safely? The Blue King and the Green King likely hadn't had enough time to escape. What had happened to them? And Ivory and Cerberus?

Haruyuki peered at the smoking ruins of the Budokan, flames still flaring up all over, and Kuroyukihime pushed hard on his back.

"Crow, over there!"

He lifted his face with a gasp as the Black King pointed with a sword tip at a building in the east.

The Purple King brandished the staff in her left hand. "I have any number of things I'd like to say, but I'll wait until later. Corvus, fly to that building!"

And indeed, before seeing to their comrades' safety, they had to do something about the owner of the massive laser. If that attack came a second or third time, he and his friends would have nowhere to run, even if they did somehow manage to survive.

However.

"I'm sorry. My concentration's at its limit!" he shouted quickly, and all three of them lurched together in midair as the overlay in his silver wings flickered irregularly. Not only was Light Speed simply unstable, he'd originally developed the technique for maximum thrust in a short time; it was definitely not intended for stable flight at lower speeds.

"Pathetic!" the Purple King snapped.

"Thorn, after being rescued, that's the tone you use?" Kuroyukihime returned, having finally gotten herself back together.

"Shut up, Lotus. We'll at least check the attack! One, two..." Purple Thorn started counting down, whether Kuroyukihime was ready or not, and the Black King clicked her tongue as she drew the sword of her right arm back.

It's all fine and dandy to say check the attack, but neither of you have

anything in your special-attack gauges! Haruyuki started to panic.

“Thorn Retribution!!”

“Vorpall Strike!!”

Lightning several orders of magnitude greater than the blow that had smashed through the roof shot out from the Purple King’s Tempest, while the Black King’s Terminate Sword launched a massive lance that shone bloodred. Both were Incarnate techniques, and with imagination strong enough to make the air around them shimmer like a mirage.

Even combined, the scale of the two techniques didn’t compare with the earlier Incarnate laser, but he was certain that the same instant death would be the result of a direct hit. The two bolts of light swallowed up the rooftop of the distant building with an earsplitting shriek, shrinking into a superdense ball of energy before exploding.

The top levels of the metal building were completely annihilated. He couldn’t tell from this distance if there was a death effect mixed in with the light of the explosion, but at the very least, their attacker wouldn’t be able to fire that laser again until they retreated to somewhere safe.

As they watched the results of the Incarnate attack, Haruyuki’s own Incarnate power was finally depleted.

“We’re going down!” he announced hurriedly, before starting to glide with wings from which the light had disappeared. Avoiding the remains of the Budokan, now a massive crater glowing with red heat, he set his sights on an area immediately to the north dotted with twisted metal objects—likely trees in a park area in the real world—and started to descend. Although he intently searched for them from the sky, he couldn’t see any sign of their comrades.

“It’s strangely bright,” the Purple King murmured, looking around at the sky.

Haruyuki also lifted his head and felt like the ominous clouds of the Purgatory stage were indeed shining a little more brightly than they had been before the meeting. But unlike the Normal Duel Field where time did not pass, day and night came and went in the Unlimited Neutral Field, so it grew brighter and darker depending on the position of the sun. In fact, he could see a hazy spot

that must have been the pale yellow sun on the other side of the clouds directly overhead, but it was nothing like the burning light of the Wasteland or a Primeval Forest.

“No, it’s nothing. Oh! Over there!” Now the Purple King pointed at the ground, so Haruyuki looked down once again. He felt like he caught a glimpse of a bright color in one corner of the metal grove and he turned their spiraling descent toward it.

As soon as his feet touched the metal ground and he set down the two kings, Haruyuki opened his mouth to call for his comrades.

“Crow!”

“Corvus!”

Lime Bell and Chocolat Puppeteer came running out from behind the shadow of a metal tree. Following them were Sky Raker in her wheelchair, animal-form Blood Leopard, and Scarlet Rain straddling her back.

In the Unlimited Neutral Field, it wasn’t possible to see the health gauges of other players, but it looked like none of his friends had taken any real damage. He nearly crumpled to the ground in his great relief, and Kuroyukihime quickly moved to hold him up.

The first to speak was Niko. She clicked her tongue lightly and then turned her large eye lenses to Haruyuki’s side. “Seriously. You rescued *her*, too?”

“Hmph, it’s not as though I asked him to,” Purple Thorn snapped back. “Although if I hadn’t been there, we couldn’t have escaped through the roof!”

Niko was ready to start yelling, but Chocolat interjected a heartbeat faster, “Both of you! Now is not the time for arguments! If we don’t hurry and decide what we’re going to do now, we’ll be in danger!”

“True.” Kuroyukihime nodded and smoothly untangled her arm from Haruyuki’s before looking around and continuing. “There are many unknowns in the sequence of events, but the situation is clear. Just as in the Territories yesterday, we have been shifted from the normal duel field to the Unlimited Neutral Field by Oracle’s Incarnate technique. Ivory Tower must have prepared a trap as insurance in case he was backed up against a wall that was impossible

to explain away.”

“W-wait just a moment.” The Purple King’s voice had lost all its earlier thorniness and was instead full of deep surprise and confusion. “Oracle...You mean Orchid Oracle who was in Oscillatory so long ago? I heard she lost all her points...And shifted from the normal duel field to the Unlimited Neutral Field, how on earth...?”

“Explanations will come later. Right now, we have to escape as soon as possible,” Kuroyukihime replied sternly, and she turned her gaze to the disturbingly formed Shinto gate visible on the north side of the trees. It had to have been the Tayasumon Gate standing to the north of the real Budokan. “Fortunately, as far as we could see from the sky, there don’t appear to be large Enemies placed at all the portals, unlike yesterday. Let’s try to join up with the others before Ivory strikes his next blow and then head for the nearest portal.”

“Right.” Purple Thorn nodded, surprisingly docile, and looked toward the crater with an expression that bordered on concern. Maybe she was worried about her deputy, Aster Vine.

Haruyuki unconsciously took a step toward her. “Um, I think Vine is okay,” he said, in a small voice. “Right before I picked you up, I told her to get out of the Budokan.”

“I-I know. Vine would never be taken down in such a slipshod attack!”

“H-hyah!” Haruyuki bobbed his head up and down, while next to him, Kuroyukihime let out a small sigh.

“Actually, I’m worried about Knight and Grandé,” she said. “They would have taken a direct hit from that laser. Given who they are, I’d like to think that a single blow wouldn’t have killed them, but if they *are* dead then we have to wait for them to regenerate.”

Hearing this, the Purple King looked at Kuroyukihime as if she had just realized something before saying, a harder edge to her voice, “Say, Lotus.”

“Mmm. What? Make it quick, please.”

“I’ll just ask at any rate,” Thorn said. “Isn’t this a golden opportunity for you? No one but six of your comrades here, and I may be good, but even I would

have a hard time turning the tables with seven against one.”

“Golden opportunity?” Kuroyukihime frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“Don’t play dumb,” the Purple King snapped. “There’s no way you haven’t noticed! I’m saying that if you attacked me here and now, you could take my head in sudden death!”

Kuroyukihime slowly blinked her violet-blue eye lenses behind her goggles.

And seeing this, Haruyuki understood that this idea hadn’t even been on Kuroyukihime’s radar. She hadn’t so much as had the thought that she could take this opportunity to defeat the Purple King and take a step up on the staircase leading to level ten. He himself also hadn’t realized that this was an option. Fuko, Chiyuri, and the others held their breath and watched how this would play out.

“I see. It’s true, it’s exactly as you say,” Kuroyukihime said slowly, and dropped her gaze to the sword of her right hand. “I have no right to talk about how that would be cowardly or how I want to stand tall and challenge you when we do fight under the sudden-death rule. Because I’m the one who drove your lover Rider to total point loss with a surprise attack.”

Thorn’s hand trembled ever so slightly. The tapered tip of the Tempest creaked, forced into the ground with all her strength, and left scratch marks on the gray metal.

Three years earlier, Kuroyukihime had pushed the former Red King, Red Rider, to total point loss because of the lies told to her by her real-life older sister, King White Cosmos. But Kuroyukihime had said before that she had no intention of using that as an excuse, and in fact, she didn’t bring it up now. Instead, the Black King told the Purple, “My objective of reaching level ten has not changed. It is simply a matter of priority. For me, it’s more important right now to beat down the Acceleration Research Society rather than take your head. If I send you to total point loss here, we can forget about anything resembling a joint mission.”

“You can say anything you like,” Thorn pushed, relentless.

“That’s true.” Kuroyukihime shrugged lightly. “But if I were the type to aim for

a king's head without thinking of strategies, don't you think I would've sent that little kid to total point loss ages ago?"

"Whoa there!" Niko called out, her voice wild as she sat on Pard's back. "Who you calling a kid—?"

But Pard wound her long tale wound around Niko's face mask to cut her off mid-sentence.

After a quick glance at Scarlet Rain, Purple Thorn gradually relaxed her tensed slender hand over the period of a few seconds. Finally, she took a slow, deep breath and nodded with the bare minimum of movement. "Well, I suppose so. At any rate, we'll put the sudden-death rule on hold now...So then, how do you intend to join up with Vine and the others? That laser will blast us again if we're not careful moving through open spaces."

"True." Kuroyukihime looked up at the eastern sky, and Haruyuki followed her.

The view was blocked by the grove of metal trees, so he could see basically nothing, but thin plumes of smoke were still rising up from the roof of the skyscraper where the giant laser user had been hiding. If they'd died in Kuroyukihime and Thorn's combined Incarnate attack, then Haruyuki and his friends were safe for just under an hour until they regenerated. But it was overly hopeful and optimistic to jump to the conclusion that a user of such a technique had died instantly in a single blow when it hadn't even been a surprise attack.

"I'm reluctant to do this, but it seems we'll have to split into two groups," the Black King said, and the Purple King nodded.

"I suppose. The Alpha team will defeat the laser user, while the Bravo team musters our scattered comrades. I will tell you now, however. The Bravo mission is also a dangerous one. I can't believe Ivory and that curious metal color died in that explosion."

Wow, the Purple King uses NATO naming codes for the team names, Haruyuki thought admiringly.

As if reading his thoughts, Purple Thorn glared at him. "I'll just tell you now.

It's Vine's style...Now, how shall we split up?"

"Uh, um, I volunteer for Alpha team! Because we'll have to get to the top of that building." Haruyuki hurried to nominate himself.

He was followed by Pard waving her tail lithely. "I'm good at climbing walls."

"No, Leopard, you stay behind," Fuko said. She glanced at the little red avatar straddling the leopard's back. "Ivory To—Black Vise might have his sights set on Invincible again. It's best if you don't stray from Rain."

"...K," Pard replied without a fight.

Niko nodded, too, despite herself. "I've been this coddled baby lately, and I don't love it. But if I get my Enhanced Armament nicked again here, I'll never be able to face Bell and Pile, not when they worked so hard to get it back for me the last time. I'll stay on the ground and round up the gang."

"Don't lose heart, Rain," Kuroyukihime cautioned. "It might very well be Dreadnought's time to shine when we need to move to the portal."

"Yeah, yeah," Niko replied.

I worked hard that last time, too, though, Haruyuki thought almost jealously.

"I will accompany Corvus." Fuko stood up smoothly from her wheelchair. "The two of us are enough for the Alpha team."

"Huh? J-just the two of us?" Haruyuki said, sounding fairly pathetic.

"If we're fighting someone with a large armament like that, rather than have our movement dulled by someone riding on our backs, it's better to go straight for the heart and close the distance at full speed," Fuko explained.

"True," Niko commented. "Totes sucks that I can't do that myself."

And so Haruyuki had no choice but to accept the decision.

There was actually one more of their group who could fly: the Archangel Metatron from whom Haruyuki had only just parted thirty minutes or so earlier in subjective time. Given that they had been pulled into the Unlimited Neutral Field, he very much wanted to borrow her strength like they had in the Territories the previous day, but after finally finding shelter, she should have

been sleeping carefree in Fufuan to heal her depleted strength, an exertion from which she still had not fully recovered.

Plus, if he turned to her for every little thing, he'd never reach his goal of becoming strong enough to protect her one day. The objective of this mission was not to defeat the enemy, but to search for and bring together the scattered meeting members—the Coba-Manga sisters, Aster Vine, the two members of the Green Legion, and just in case the Yellow Legion's Lemon Pierrette—and then join up with the Blue and Green Kings (the vanished Yellow King had probably left on his own), before escaping through the portal, so he had to at least do this much on his own.

Of course, that didn't mean he could let his guard down. The responsibility of the Alpha team Haruyuki had volunteered for was heavy. They had to approach and eliminate the enemy as soon as possible, before they could fire that Incarnate laser again.

Strengthening his resolve, Haruyuki looked up at the sky once more, and Chiyuri asked from behind him, "Crow, it's fine if that's what you want to do, but is your special-attack gauge charged?"

"Huh? ...Oh." Here, he finally remembered that the key to everything, his special-attack gauge, was totally empty. For a second, he thought he could do Light Speed again, but it was too risky to rely on Incarnate alone when fighting an enemy.

"G-got it. I'll just go smash some trees—" *And charge it.*

Before he could finish his sentence, however, the Purple King commanded him, "Stand still."

Haruyuki stiffened in place, and she pressed the tip of her staff up against his side. The tapered crystal dug into his thin armor, and he started to get confused, worrying that his health gauge would drop if it went any farther.

"Elementary Charge," she called the technique name curtly, and the crystal shone with purple light.

Haruyuki's special-attack gauge began to charge with incredible force. In mere seconds, it was full, and Thorn pulled the staff away.

“...Th-thank you very much.” After offering his baffled thanks, he couldn’t hold his curiosity back. “C-can that technique endlessly charge other people’s gauges?”

“Ridiculous. Why would it be able to? My own gauge decreases, of course.”

Oh, is that it? Still, it’s an amazing power, he thought briefly.

“That said, it is multiplied 1.60217662 times, however.”

“...You could just say 1.6 times...,” he muttered.

“Quiet,” the Purple King snapped. “At any rate, you volunteered for Alpha team, so ensure that you defeat the laser user. I’m not interested in being hit with it again.”

“H-hyah.” Haruyuki was frozen in place.

Kuroyukihime had a look in her eyes like she wanted to say something, but what came out of her mouth was enthusiastic encouragement. “We’re counting on you, Crow, Raker. Once you engage the laser user, we will fan out and find the others. Let’s make our meeting point the Budokan remains.”

“Roger. We’ll take care of them right away.” Unlike Haruyuki, Fuko didn’t need her special-attack gauge for flight. She put her wheelchair away using the Instruct menu rather than a voice command and summoned Gale Thruster in its place. It took effort, but she managed to turn off the flashy effect of materialization, so as not to attract the enemy’s attention. “Okay, we’re off then, Corvus. Let’s move a little ways out before taking off.”

Fuko glanced back and the two of them exchanged a nod before starting to run below the metal trees.

Behind them, Shihoko called out “Please fight hard!” to which Haruyuki raised a fist in response.

Sky Raker and Silver Crow blended into the gray stand of trees and disappeared from view. A few seconds later, Shihoko heard a roar, and Raker appeared above the treetops, trailing pale injection flames with Crow by her side, silver wings spread wide. But she saw them only for an instant before they

shot away into the eastern sky at incredible speed.

Clutching chocolate hands in front of her, Shihoko prayed in her heart, *Arita, Master Fuko, fight...But don't go overboard.*

Shihoko had managed to more or less fulfill the role given to her at her first meeting of the Seven Kings. Or she thought so, at least. She'd only just reached level five, and for her, Blue Knight, Green Grandé, and Purple Thorn were the stuff of legends, so just seeing them made her legs shake. But when she thought about how Nega Nebulus Legion Master Kuroyukihime was surprisingly like a spoiled child and raged with jealousy, and how Scarlet Rain, whom she hadn't met in person yet, was adorable in a different way than herself, and yet they were both level-nine kings, it eased her nerves just the tiniest bit. By the time she had started to explain the replay card, she was even inwardly snarling at Ivory Tower. *Ha! Take this!*

Her playback of the recording ended without incident, and as she watched the kings interrogate Ivory, Shihoko had felt relieved that now they would finally be able to pin the hated Acceleration Research Society against the wall.

But then a nineteenth person had shown up at the meeting, even though they shouldn't have been there at all, and changed the meeting venue to the Unlimited Neutral Field, rendering Shihoko helpless again. She'd stood there dumbfounded as Sky Raker grabbed her, and as soon as they'd fled outside on her automatic wheelchair, a reddish-purple light had poured down from the eastern sky and smashed the Budokan to smithereens.

Raker, holding tightly to Shihoko and Lime Bell, and Blood Leopard, Red King riding on her back, had raced along the extremely undulating ground of the Purgatory stage at an unbelievable speed and escaped the ballooning explosion behind them. They had then continued their retreat to the metal forest on the northwest side of the Budokan, and Silver Crow had descended from the eastern sky a minute or two later, carrying the Black and Purple Kings.

Shihoko had listened to the two kings speaking and somehow managed to digest the situation they were in, but now split off onto the Bravo team, she regrettably couldn't think of anything she could do to help. Obviously, her fighting power didn't begin to compare with the three kings or Blood Leopard,

and it wasn't as though she had some special ability like Lime Bell. In fact, she could barely take care of her own self.

I'm still so weak. She hid her face with the brim of her bonnet and gritted her teeth.

"All right, you're up, Chocolat," the Black King said suddenly.

"Wha—?" Shihoko blubbered.

"You can produce five of your Chocopets using your full gauge, yes?"

"Oh. Y-yes!" She hurriedly nodded. To be more precise, she had to use up her entire special-attack gauge to create the largest possible chocolate pond and then fill her gauge again before expending it to create ten Chocopets simultaneously, but Kuroyukihime was not wrong that the maximum number of Chocopets she could create on one gauge was five.

"Good. Do it then...Thorn." Kuroyukihime gave the signal, and the Purple King approached Shihoko, her heels clacking.

"Honestly. At this rate, my gauge is going to be empty, too." She touched the large crystal at the end of the staff to Shihoko's right shoulder—there was apparently no need for it to be the stomach like with Silver Crow—and called the technique name.

The charging finished with her gauge half full, so she kicked over some small metal shrubs to top it off. Once her special-attack gauge was full, she used Cocoa Fountain to create her chocolate pond and then generated five chocolate dolls with her Puppet Maker.

"Hmph. Interesting technique," the Purple King said, sounding impressed.

"Looks kinda yummy."

Ignoring the apparently hungry Red King, the Black King pointed in the direction of Budokan. "Good. Now, once Raker and Crow start fighting, we set out on the search of the other meeting members. We'll move in a group, just in case, but the Chocopets will disperse. If they find a Burst Linker, they will guide them to Choco."

"O-okay," Shihoko said. "That's possible, but the Chocopets can't tell the

difference between allies and enemies.”

“That’s fine.” Kuroyukihime nodded. “If they drag an enemy back to us, we’ll simply defeat them.”

“Understood!” Shihoko looked once more to the eastern sky. She couldn’t see any battle effects in the cluster of skyscrapers in Kudanshita yet. Maybe Crow and Raker were still searching, or maybe they were chasing the fleeing enemy.

“Oh! There!” Lime Bell shouted, and at the same time, Shihoko noticed several narrow lasers firing toward the northern sky from the roof of a fairly low building adjacent to the skyscraper the Black and Purple Kings had destroyed.

“All right, here we go!” Kuroyukihime shouted.

“K,” Blood Leopard replied for all of them, and then the six Burst Linkers and five Chocopets flew out of the grove of metal trees running to the south, keeping careful watch on their surroundings all the while.



Avoid being sniped by the large Incarnate laser in flight, attack the origin, kill the sniper in a joint attack with Raker: This was the scenario Haruyuki had imagined, but the laser wasn’t fired during the ten or so seconds it took for them to reach Kudanshita flying at top speed.

When they arrived in the airspace above the skyscraper that Kuroyukihime and the Purple King had destroyed with their Incarnate techniques, he decelerated abruptly to a hover. Fuko also powered down her thrusters, so he held her up with one arm around her slender waist.

Seen from above, the destruction could have only been described as extremely gruesome in a sense altogether different from the Budokan ruins. The structure that begun to fuse together in the Purple King’s Incarnate electrical attack had been knocked flying by Kuroyukihime’s Vorpall Strike. It looked almost as though the spoon of a giant had scooped out the top of the building.

“This building’s the Chiyoda Ward government office, right?” Haruyuki murmured, as he looked for enemies in the wreckage. “It’s a landmark, so it should have been stronger than the other buildings...”

“If you got caught in this attack, you’d have no hope unless you were the Green King.” Even the great Fuko had a note of awe in her voice. “But as far as I can see, there’s no sign of the enemy and no death markers, either...All ward offices have portals on the first floor, so perhaps they escaped through that.”

“That complicates everything,” he groaned. “They might dive again right away as soon as we leave the area.”

“Indeed.” Fuko nodded. “But no matter how accustomed to it you are, it takes two seconds from the time you wake up in the real world until you reaccelerate with Unlimited Burst again. That’s just over thirty minutes on this side. We were in the woods for five minutes, so they won’t be able to come back for another twenty-five minutes.”

“Twenty-five minutes...”

Would they be able to find all their comrades—well, the meeting participants—and escape from a portal before that clock ran down? Haruyuki started to shift his gaze back to the right, to the site of the Budokan.

“Corvus!” Fuko cried—or perhaps thought—sharply.

A reddish-purple light flashed in the corner of Haruyuki’s eye.

Hyoon! Together with a sound he’d heard before, two laser beams as thin as threads came charging at them, the exact same color as the super-massive laser that had destroyed the Budokan.

Reflexively, Haruyuki slid to his left at top speed, but he was unable to completely avoid one of the lasers, and it shot through a metal fin on his right wing. Because the beam was extremely narrow, all it did was cut a hole of about a centimeter in the fin. His health gauge didn’t drop much at all, but he couldn’t deny that the blow had reduced his mobility, albeit ever so slightly.

But there was a more pressing issue.

“Where...?!” Haruyuki shouted.

“I didn’t see it,” Fuko replied, hushed. “But we won’t miss it next time. Concentrate.”

“R-right!” Nodding, Haruyuki stared in the direction the twin lasers had come

from.

They waited dozens of seconds, several minutes, in a game of chicken with the laser user. And then.

“There!” Fuko shouted abruptly. She pointed not in the direction of the Chiyoda Ward office with its top floors gouged out, but toward the roof of a building roughly the same height on the north side of the road between them.

“But...no one’s—” Before he could get the “there” out, the reddish-purple light flashed once more.

This time, Haruyuki saw it, too. The head of a duel avatar slipped out soundlessly from the shadow created by the three large protrusions on the roof, likely exhaust vents or something originally. The source of the light was a massive lens in that avatar’s head—no, that avatar’s *hat*.

“Let’s go!” Fuko cried, and was drowned out by the sound of the double laser firing once more.

Pyoo!

Haruyuki didn’t try to dodge. Instead, he stretched out his arms, now free of Fuko, and caught the two laser beams on his forearms.

Although Silver Crow’s silver mirrored armor generally couldn’t reflect a laser this powerful, there was one exception—the light-guiding crystals in his arm armor, which had reflected even the Trisagion of Metatron’s first form. These crystals caught the focused laser beams, altered their course, and sent them shooting past him.

Immediately, Fuko charged, tracing the glow of the laser backward. She flipped Gale Thruster upside down and closed in on the sniper at maximum power, her right leg stretched out straight. But the shooter was already sinking back into the shadows. She wasn’t going to make it in time.

“Haaaaah!” Sky Raker roared, and the booster’s angle of propulsion changed ever so slightly.

Turning to the left in midair, rather than take out the enemy sinking into the shadows, Fuko mowed down the exhaust pipes right in front of them, smashing

all three of the meter-wide tubes extending from the roof and causing their inky shadows to vanish.

Not one but two figures shot up out of the missing shadow on the roof, bounding back as though repelled by a trampoline, and danced up into the air. One was covered in a reddish-purple armor very similar to the color of the laser, an F-type avatar wearing a massive hat that swelled up in a diamond shape. And the other was an M-type avatar with dark gray armor tinged with a hint of blue and a masked face that revealed only a thin band where his eye lenses were.

Haruyuki didn't need to see the detailed features to recognize them. The Acceleration Research Society's number two, Quad Eyes Analyst, Argon Array. And the ninja who was Black Vise's self-proclaimed student, shadow user Shadow Cloaker.

A *bo-shuriken*—a *kunai* throwing knife—poked out of Argon's back, and the thin string attached to it was looped around Cloaker's left hand. When Black Vise pulled people into the shadows, he used his panels to hold them, and it appeared his student Cloaker managed the same trick with a *kunai* and a string.

Knocked out of the shadows by Fuko's quick thinking, the two Society members were already turning in midair to get into fighting position. Cloaker had already pulled out a new *bo-shuriken*.

This is bad.

If that blade pierced either of their shadows, Cloaker's Incarnate technique Shadow Tying would render them unable to move or speak. And now that she had destroyed the exhaust pipes, Fuko's shadow was deep and black on the rooftop. The ninja would no doubt throw his *shuriken* at the shadow of her feet the instant she landed. And then when she was unable to move, Argon would fire her lasers at close range. He had three—no, two seconds before that happened.

He hadn't shifted to the Highest Level, but time in Haruyuki's brain was compressed to almost that extent, and he settled on a countermeasure in 0.5 seconds after examining countless options.

The only Incarnate technique he had that could cover the fifty meters

between him and Cloaker was Laser Javelin, but it took more time to activate than Laser Sword or Laser Lance, so there was no way he'd make it in time. But he did have one other long-distance attack he could use in this situation.

Haruyuki looked down and checked his own shadow falling on the southern wall of the building Cloaker and Argon had bounced out of. Matching the timing of Fuko's descent, he ascended at full speed a mere three meters before rapidly decelerating.

At the same time, Cloaker threw his *shuriken* from the air with impressive control. The instant Fuko landed, it would plunge into her feet. But a tenth of a second before that, Fuko's shadow was completely swallowed up by Haruyuki's from where he was hung in the air.

The worst-case scenario was they would both end up paralyzed, but Haruyuki was convinced that wouldn't happen. The essence of an Incarnate technique was that it interfered with the system through an image, and it would have been impossible for Cloaker to imagine Fuko's shadow when Silver Crow's had painted over it.

The *shuriken* plunged into the metal roof, and Haruyuki's entire body stiffened with a *creak*. He couldn't move so much as a fingertip. This was only natural, of course, given that he had intended to take Fuko's place as the target of the Shadow Tying technique. But it was not a problem.

Frozen in midair, Silver Crow lost the thrust of his wings and started to fall. This inevitably forced his shadow to move as well, and the *bo-shuriken* was left all alone in the light of day.

In the span of a second, Haruyuki had regained his freedom, while Fuko kicked off the floor and moved out of range of the paralyzing effect. She jumped to stand precisely on the line between the sun and Cloaker to hide her own shadow behind her, and then turned on the tips of her toes and immediately put some distance between them.

The ninja also finally touched down on the roof and quickly pulled his ninja sword from behind his waist.

"Zan!" He had no sooner gotten within reach than he was slicing with divine speed.

“Fwah!” With a sharp breath, Fuko caught it with a right palm strike.

The cutting edge of that sword had been sharp enough to slice right through Haruyuki’s leg. And Sky Raker might have been a blue type, but she was definitely no heavyweight, so he wouldn’t have been surprised to see her arm get lopped off.

However.

Skreenk! The squeal of metal against metal shook the air, and what danced up into the air was not Fuko’s hand but the blade of the sword, broken off at the base. The ninja seemed to have not expected this, and he stopped moving for a heartbeat.

That was more than enough of an opening for Strong Arm Raker. With the smoothness of flowing water, she stepped in close and gently pressed her left palm to the center of the ninja’s chest. “*Haah!!*”

She roared the battle cry even more loudly than before.

Cracks spread outward in the metal floor beneath her high heels, and Shadow Cloaker’s chest together with the armor on his back shattered, exploding from inside. As the ninja collapsed onto his knees, Fuko gently wrapped her hands around the sides of his head.

Paaaan! The sound of destruction was earsplitting. The ninja’s face mask and helmet shattered, before his entire body caved in on itself, enveloped in bluish-black flames. The fire quickly disappeared, leaving nothing but a dark blue death marker behind.

The previous day, it had taken the combined efforts of Haruyuki, Chiyuri, and Trilead Tetroxide to defeat Shadow Cloaker, and now he had been buried in a mere two blows—awe-inspiring power. Most likely, Fuko had said the name of her penetrating blow ability, but still, Haruyuki couldn’t even imagine what specific logic was at work there.

But he hadn’t simply been watching the back-and-forth between Raker and Cloaker off on the sidelines with Argon Array. The F-type avatar had tried to fire her laser at Fuko when she escaped the Shadow Tying, but Haruyuki had already started his charge to stop her.

The lasers in Argon Array's hat and goggles required a minimum of three seconds to charge. Which meant that if Argon had steeled herself to accept the blow from Haruyuki, she could still have fired on Fuko, but she stopped and jumped back—which was what Haruyuki was sure she would do. Because nowhere in the Analyst's doctrine did it mention the act of sacrificing herself to save a comrade.

Tracking the battle between Fuko and the ninja out of the corner of his eye, Haruyuki landed in the center of the roof and readied both arms in front of his body. Meanwhile, Argon retreated to the northwestern corner and let her arms hang loosely at her sides.

The silent standoff only lasted two seconds. Having defeated Shadow Cloaker, Fuko came to stand next to Haruyuki, and Argon heaved an immense sigh.

"Aah. This here's why I can never trust ol' Ba when he says it's an easy job, just shoot an' run." Reaching around with one hand, she pulled the *kunai* out of her back and tossed it toward Cloaker's death marker before putting her hands on her hips and heaving a deep sigh.

"Aah. Y'know, if I wanna fire that kinda laser like I did with the Budokan back there, I gotta charge it for a whole hour, yah? I don't got the time for that. And ninja boy there's dead, too. Can ya just let me leave through the portal?"

"Master, you can't listen to a word she says," Haruyuki said immediately. He wanted to plug his own ears after having been misled far too many times by the woman in the past.

"I know," Fuko replied. "We'll defeat her. You prioritize cutting off her retreat, Corvus."

"Okay. And please be careful of her glamour techniques."

He had been on the verge of defeating Argon in a joint battle with Aqua Current when he'd been blinded by the technique Razzle Dazzle, a powerful light that shone from her four eye lenses, and the Analyst had run off scot-free.

"Not a fan o' that." A wry smile crossed Argon's lips below her goggles. "Boyo there giving away my secrets. Just how it's gotta be, I s'pose. I'll hafta run then."

Hands still on her hips, she leaned back against the metal railing that encircled

the roof. She turned like that, and went over the parapet as though someone on the other side was yanking on her large hat, disappearing from Haruyuki's field of view.

"She fell?!" He gasped and reflexively kicked off the ground, spreading his wings.

"Stop!" Fuko shouted from behind, so he grabbed the railing just as he was about to fly over it and braked abruptly. Two laser beams shot past him, almost close enough to graze his helmet. If he'd flown off like he wanted, they would have gone right through his head.

Okay, now! he thought and was about to jump over the railing fully when Fuko again grabbed him and yanked his body back. Another pair of lasers cut in front of him and plunged into the clouds above, leaving a charred scent in the air.

Having almost died twice in as many seconds, Haruyuki was unable to move, feet still on the handrail. But now Fuko slapped his back.

"Go!" she shouted, so on his third attempt at flight, his body did, in fact, dance into the air. He spread his wings and dived straight down.

Having fired both her hat lasers and her eye lasers, Argon was in free fall, already more than fifty meters ahead of him. The Chiyoda Ward office had been rebuilt at the beginning of the 2040s and was now 180 meters tall, and the building she'd fallen off was basically the same height. Even a high ranker wouldn't be able to escape death dropping from such an altitude, but he never knew what kind of secret cards Argon Array had up her sleeves.

I'll finish her with a full-powered dive kick before she hits the ground! Haruyuki focused on the image of light in his wings.

"Light...Speed!!" His roar became a silver overlay that enveloped his slightly damaged silver fins in a dazzling light. The toes of his extended right leg became the sharp tip of a lance, and Haruyuki charged toward Argon ten times faster than she was falling.

"Infinite Array!" Argon shouted again in the stretched-out time of his accelerated senses.

A lurid violet overlay enveloped the Analyst and converged into an ordered dot pattern to produce countless tiny lenses on the surface of her armor. Likely more than a hundred eyeball lenses, each with a purple light shining inside.

This was the first time Haruyuki had seen with his own eyes Argon Array's Incarnate technique. But it wasn't unknown to him. Blood Leopard had told him all about it after she'd taken serious damage from this technique in the battle at the Eternal Girls' Academy.

Pard had said Argon's Infinite Array had absolutely no blind spots. It was essentially perfect and almost impossibly powerful for an attack-type Incarnate technique. There was nowhere to hide from it, not behind or below her. The focused lasers fired in all directions and pierced anything and everything in the vicinity. If the technique *did* have a blind spot, it was not outside Argon, but inside, in her heart. That's what Pard had told him.

And the nature of the technique meant that the closer you were to her, the more lasers you had turned on you. Which is why Argon tried to draw in her enemy unawares until the last possible second. And Haruyuki's Optical Conduction ability reflected light attacks, so she must have wanted to shower him in infinite lasers, too many for him to handle with just two arms. However. This was a weakness he could exploit, albeit ever so slightly.

As Haruyuki charged in a Light Speed dive, his distance from Argon and her body full of laser lenses closed rapidly. Ten meters. Seven. Five...But Argon still didn't move to fire her omnidirectional lasers. Four meters, three...Two.

Finally, the infinite galaxy of lasers flashed with bright light.

At exactly the same time, Haruyuki called the wings on loan to him from the Archangel he had bonded with. *"Equip! Metatron Wings!"*

This call didn't actually come out of his mouth; it was a simple thought that didn't even span an entire second. If it had been a normal Enhanced Armament, the BB system wouldn't have recognized this as a voice command and he most likely wouldn't have been able to summon the armament. But Metatron Wings were connected to the system via his link with the Archangel, and that link didn't require his avatar's physical voice.

A new pair of white wings appeared on Haruyuki's back. The superb

propulsive power, so great that it had broken free of even the instant death range of the God Suzaku, instantly doubled the speed of his charge. He moved faster than Argon's exquisitely timed attack, and a mere 0.0000...1 second before the infinity of lasers fired, his white-hot toes pierced her torso.

Aah, this is why I said I didn't wanna do this.

In his head, Haruyuki felt like he heard her complain, and then Argon Array, who had always managed to make a smooth escape and survive another day no matter how hard her back was pressed up against the wall, shattered into countless fragments and exploded in all directions.

We won! Haruyuki shouted in his heart, using his four wings to reduce velocity.

When he looked up, he saw a reddish-purple death marker slowly falling, trailing a tail of particles. But he couldn't actually jump for joy just yet. This was only one small victory in the Unlimited Neutral Field, and Argon had lost only the tiniest fraction of what was surely a vast store of Burst Points. He would save his celebration for when everyone at the meeting had safely escaped the trap Black Vise had set.

But at the very least, they wouldn't be shot at by the massive laser again for an hour—no, two if Argon was to be believed. All they had to do was find everyone and return to the real world through the portal on the first floor of the Chiyoda Ward office before that happened.

Still, had Black Vise really thought he could take the upper hand by dragging everyone at the meeting of the Seven Kings into the Unlimited Neutral Field and blasting them with that laser? No matter how powerful Argon Array's charged beam was, the notion that it would kill six kings in a single blow was absurd. And even if she had managed to kill them, all that meant was the kings would lose a couple points, just like the recently deceased Argon. When they regenerated, the six kings would still kill Argon and Vise or return to the real world without killing them and immediately launch the general attack on the White Legion. Now that they knew Ivory Tower was Black Vise and Oscillatory Universe was the Acceleration Research Society, the attack was inevitable.



As Haruyuki considered this, he killed his descent and hovered twenty meters above the ground before he turned his gaze to the Budokan in the south.

“.....Ngh!!”

Beyond the cratered Budokan, in an area dotted with galleries and museums, he could see several massive silhouettes thrashing around. At that size, they had to be Beast-class Enemies.

Before he could really react to this new threat, a death effect in a familiar color erupted high into the sky from the center of the still-smoking crater.

* * *

Shihoko had no sooner flown out of the metal forest than she was instructing her five Chocopets, “Disperse in that direction and find Burst Linkers! When you find them, you must bring them back to me!”

Heads with flowery markings bobbed up and down, and then the chocolate dolls ran off separately into the metal grove to the southwest of Kitanomaru Park. They couldn’t accept complicated orders, but they should have been able to search and return at least.

When she could no longer see the Chocopets, she looked up once more at the skyscraper to the east. She couldn’t see the light of battle, but Silver Crow and Sky Raker had to have been facing off against the Burst Linker who had attacked them with that incredibly powerful laser.

The chocolate-colored armor of Chocolat Puppeteer was not real chocolate, unlike that of the Chocopets, but it was similarly sweet. Its smoothness and attack-absorbing abilities made it surprisingly strong against striking blows, but it had terrible heat resistance. A laser that could destroy a large Purgatory-stage building in a single bow would have melted her armor away if it so much as grazed her.

So even if there had been a way for Shihoko to go with them, she would have just weighed Crow and Raker down, rather than being any kind of help. She knew all too well that there was an infinite variety of duel avatars—right person in the right place and all that—but even so, there were so many all-rounders in Nega Nebulus, she keenly felt her own powerlessness at every turn.

Kuroyukihime had told her that it was her turn, and her Chocopets would be useful in the search, but when all was said and done, the essence of a Burst Linker was in the fight. Brain Burst was a fighting game, after all.

I want to get stronger. How can I get stronger, though? she mourned as she looked up at the building.

“Wohkay, we’ll go check out Budokan,” the Red King said nearby. “Someone mighta gone back there.”

“I suppose so.” Kuroyukihime nodded, staring at the heart of the explosion a hundred meters to the southeast. Shihoko followed her sharp gaze.

There was no sign of the Nippon Budokan and its air of proud majesty even there in the Purgatory stage. One of the outer walls remained, but the large octagonal roof and the onion on top had been completely blown away, while the interior was now a charred crater. She couldn’t believe that such massive destruction had been caused by a single Burst Linker—most likely using the power of the Incarnate System that Shihoko and the other members of the Petit Paquet group still only knew by name.

“I’m concerned about what happened with Ivory Tower and Wolfram Cerberus, but we have to join up with the others before Crow and Raker finish their fight. All right. Let’s go.” Kuroyukihime started hovering, and Blood Leopard, with the Red King on her back, followed forward, as did the Purple King.

Running after them alongside Lime Bell, Shihoko asked quietly, “Say, Bell?”

Lime Bell/Chiyuri Kurashima blinked her large eye lenses just once at the sudden disappearance of Shihoko’s overly polite manner of speaking. “What’s up, Choco?”

“Um. Do you plan to learn Incarnate techniques?”

“Uhhhh, Incarnate?” Lime Bell sounded a bit like she was playing dumb, but then Shihoko noticed the faint shadow on her face mask. “I think I’ll have to learn at some point. But...I’m a little scared.”

“Scared...”

“Yeah...It wasn’t an attack technique or anything, but I used Incarnate power once before.”

At Lime Bell’s almost whispered confession, Shihoko opened both eyes wide. She desperately wanted to hear the rest of the story, but Kuroyukihime, in the lead, stopped and looked back.

“Once we’re inside, don’t neglect to keep an eye out in all directions. I very much doubt that Ivory and Wolfram Cerberus died in that laser attack.”

“I am aware,” Purple Thorn replied, voice tense as always; Shihoko and Chiyuri nodded.

“I’m sorry, Choco. I’ll tell you the rest of the story later.”

“Mmm. I’m sorry, too, for asking you at a time like this...”

They quickly apologized to each other and then switched gears.

The remains of the outer wall were laid out before the six Burst Linkers, melted at the ends and charred in other places. Seeing it up close, she couldn’t help but feel another shiver of fear at the power of the laser, but the kings showed no particular emotion as they continued inside through a gap where the outer wall had been completely destroyed. Shihoko and Lime Bell chased after them, keeping an eye out to their rear.

They detoured around a burned-out steel pillar in the shape of a gravestone that appeared ahead of them, and when the arena came into sight, the place where they’d gathered for the meeting of the Seven Kings not more than twenty minutes earlier, Shihoko stopped dead in her tracks, dumbfounded.

She could only describe it as ground zero. The floor of the large space, perhaps sixty or seventy meters around, was completely melted away, and a crater had even been gouged out of the supposedly indestructible stage ground. On top of that, there were mountains of rubble everywhere, likely the remains of the roof and the spectator seats, with plumes of black smoke rising, still on fire somewhere deep inside.

“I can’t see a single death marker, hmm?” the Purple King commented, and Shihoko hurriedly scanned the crater; indeed, she couldn’t spot any markers, either.

“Yaah. But what if the markers are under all that garbage and stuff?” the Red King asked.

“If there’s enough space to regenerate under it, the marker stays where it is,” the Black King responded. “If it’s completely buried, the marker will shift to sit on top of objects.”

“Hmm.” Scarlet Rain paused thoughtfully. “So then if you keep piling on the garbage, you can make the marker go up and up and up.”

“If Knight or Grandé died, you could go ahead and try it,” Black Lotus agreed. “But it seems that they survived the explosion. So in that case, where—?”

“Shh!” Blood Leopard hissed, the Red King still sitting on her back. Her triangular ears moved from side to side as if trying to pick up a faint sound. “I hear a voice.”

She started padding along on four feet, and the other avatars hurried after her. Finally, the leopard stopped in front of a particularly high mountain of rubble on the south side of the crater. The entire party closed their mouths and pricked their ears. There was indeed a faint voice coming from the area at their feet.

“Oooiii, get us out!”

“...Knight?”

The Black and Purple Kings exchanged a look and then stared at the mountain briefly before readying sword and staff.

Shihoko began to panic. They couldn’t possibly intend to blow the rubble away with a special attack. Fortunately, however, that wasn’t what they were doing.

“Hah!” Kuroyukihime’s sword arms flashed faster than the eye could follow and sliced up chunks of metal and pillars on the pile. The Purple King then swung her staff almost like a shovel to send the bite-size debris flying off to the sides.

They were surprisingly in sync as they worked, and the mountain of rubble shrank in the blink of an eye from towering above their heads to almost even

with the floor.

“That’s enough!” The voice was much clearer than before.

The Black and Purple Kings stepped back, and the remaining rubble flew up as if exploding from the inside. Out of the massive hole in the ground beneath it came the Blue King, Blue Knight, and the Green King, Green Grandé.

“Aah, sorry ’bout that. Making you work.” Blue Knight stretched as he thanked them, his armor covered in scratches, the cape on his back ripped to shreds.

Green Grandé’s injuries were fewer, but there were more burn marks on his armor than on that of the Blue King and the large shield he held in one hand was half-melted.

“I expected you’d be alive. But why were you buried in this hole?” Purple Thorn asked.

“Aah.” Knight scratched his horned helmet as if slightly abashed. “G defended against that wild laser itself with his shield. But, like, the area was an incandescent inferno, and we figured it was getting pretty dodgy what with the roof and the wall and everything falling on us from above. So G used his Double Payback to dig us a hole and we just sorta jumped on in.”

Shihoko had also been taught about Double Payback, the special ability of the Green King’s Arc. If Grandé completely defended against an attack, no matter what it was, he could double the force of it and reflect it back outward. So this time, rather than counterattack the invisible shooter, he had used the force to create a shelter to avoid the flames and debris.

“And so it’s all well and good that we survived, but then there was all that junk piled up on top of us. Tried to lift it off, but we were stuck in these awkward positions. I couldn’t really push properly, and my hand wouldn’t reach the hilt to try and draw my sword...Aah, you really saved our bacon.”

“So then old man Grandé defended against the laser and dug the hole. And Lotus and Thorn cleared the rubble away. You’re the only one not doing anything, ain’tcha?” Scarlet Rain jabbed at him mercilessly.

“Whoa, whoa.” The Blue King spread his hands in protest. “I could’ve gotten

us out in three seconds if I'd used an Incarnate technique, y'know? But it'd be a hassle if Enemies came crawling around. We were sure someone'd come back for us once they took care of the sniper, so we waited...So? Who was it who took out that fat jerk?"

"No, not yet."

"Huh?"

"Our Raker and Crow are fighting them right now," Kuroyukihime replied, and glanced up toward the eastern sky. Obstructed by the remains of the outer wall, they couldn't see it directly, but in that very moment, the two members of Nega Nebulus would have been doing battle with the laser sniper on the skyscraper in Kudanshita.

"Wh-whoa, whoa." The Blue King sounded panicked. "So if those two get done in, we're gonna get hit by that laser again."

"No, they will definitely defeat the laserist," the Black King announced curtly. "So our job is to find everyone at the meeting and move to the portal before Ivory Tower comes at us with anything else."

"True." Blue Knight nodded and opened his mouth to say something else, but —

"Boooooooss!!"

A throaty M-type voice rang out across the crater,

"Masterrrrr!"

followed by that of a husky F type.

The entire party looked to the south as several duel avatars came running in through a gap in the outer wall. Iron Pound and Suntan Chafer from the Green Legion. Aster Vine from the Purple Legion. And still on her balance ball even now, the Yellow Legion's Lemon Pierrette.

Four Chocopets trotted in behind them. Apparently, each one had found a Burst Linker and guided them here just as Shihoko had ordered. The last must have been still looking.

"Myyy. Those dolls—Chocopets, was it? They're rather capable, aren't they?"

The Purple King slid over to Shihoko, and whispered, “Are they treating you right in Negabu? If you’re unhappy, you can—”

“Hey! You there! Don’t you take advantage of this situation to try and steal our hope away from us!” Kuroyukihime shouted, while Shihoko simply froze in place.

But the Purple King continued, undaunted, “Get in touch,” before returning to her original position.

Iron Pound ran over, and the Blue King started in on him instead of the Green King.

“Where’d you all run off to? That laser’s a mean piece of work, I know, but the executives of seven—no, six great Legions, I mean...”

Shihoko was quietly impressed with the nerve—or shamelessness—of Blue Knight lecturing the members of the Green Legion with Green Grandé standing right next to him.

“N-no!” Pound shook his head back and forth quickly. “We didn’t run away, it’s—”

“Enemies, Master!” shouted the Purple King’s deputy, Aster Vine, whip bundled up in one hand. “It appears that that laser was an Incarnate technique, at least second stage. Enemies drawn in by it are gathering in droves from the south. The lesser classes came at first, and we managed to crush them, but now, Wild and Beast classes are approaching!”

“Aaaaaproaaaaaching!” Pierrette added, an edge of panic bleeding into her voice.

Shihoko quickly pricked her own ears and felt like she could indeed hear the faint sound of heavy footsteps.

Open spaces in the Unlimited Neutral Field—large parks and school grounds—were often Enemy nests. Shihoko, Yume, and Satomi had also first met their pet Coolu on the grounds of Sakurami Junior High School. There had to have been all kinds of Enemies living in the southern part of Kitanomaru Park, as well as in the east gardens and Imperial Anterior Gardens to the southeast, and now they were moving north, drawn in by the scent of an Incarnate technique.

“Enemies,” Black Lotus groaned. “Was this Ivory Tower’s—no, Black Vise’s plan?”

Scarlet Rain clicked her tongue. “Trying for Unlimited EK, huh? Sounds like something that planky jerk’d think up. In which case, Vise and Cerberus musta run away.”

“NP,” the crimson leopard beneath the Red King said calmly. “This group, we can even break through Beast class.”

Exactly. It was probably just as she said. Shihoko had only just reached level five, so it went without saying that even Wild-class Enemies were so powerful she’d have been helpless against them on her own, much less Beast-class Enemies. But she was standing there with five kings and their deputies. Plus, the Blue King was a legendary swordsman who had defeated even Legend-class Enemies on his own.

“It’s all right, Vine. We’ll handle the rest.” The Purple King stepped over to Aster Vine and patted her on the back as if commending her. “Once we join up with Blue’s Dualis and Black’s Alpha team, we’ll break through the circle of Enemies and escape through the nearest portal. You did well.”

“No...I couldn’t...couldn’t do anything...” Aster Vine’s voice was hoarse, as if she was overcome with emotion.

“King! You’re all right!”

“We dishonor ourselves for our late appearance!”

New voices came to them from the east, followed by Cobalt Blade and Manganese Blade appearing through a gap in the outer wall. Shihoko could also see the fifth Chocopet trailing along behind them.

“Good. We’re all here. Now it’s just Crow and Raker.” Kuroyukihime looked up at the eastern sky once more.

At precisely that moment, circles of vivid purple light shimmered outward on the side of one of the skyscrapers. Countless tiny explosions erupted on the wall and then on the ground and the nearby buildings.

“That’s...Argon’s Infinite Array,” Leopard muttered.

“Argon...Quad Eyes?!” groaned Iron Pound.

For a moment, everyone, including Cobalt and Manganese trotting their way, focused on the building in the distance. And almost as if taking careful aim at this momentary opening, a duel avatar appeared soundlessly from the shadow at the base of an outer wall panel that had survived the fire on the south side of the crater, where the destruction was greatest.

A slight metal color with gray metal armor and a face mask like a wolf. Today was the first time she'd seen him with her own eyes, but she knew his name: Wolfram Cerberus. The duel genius who had shown up in the Accelerated World about a month earlier and managed an overwhelming win rate centered in Nakano Area No. 2 when he was still only level one.

And then she heard the same voice as in the Territories the previous day, the one that sounded like a schoolteacher somehow. “Cerberus I. Activate.”

Dark lines of red light flared to life on the face of the gray avatar, its head still hanging.

Krk! The face mask opened, zigzagging like a wolf's fangs, no light in the eyes behind goggles that were three centimeters thick. Only a dark red light Shihoko recognized from somewhere swirled in the open maw.

“Be careful!”

She couldn't tell who shouted.

Black flames, darkness itself, gushed from the four sharp protrusions on Cerberus's back, and the small avatar instantly disappeared from Shihoko's field of view. Even though she'd trained her dynamic vision as a fighting type, she still couldn't even catch a glimpse of the afterimage.

Skreeenk! She heard an extremely unpleasant sound on her left and turned—

Where she saw Manganese Blade, gripping the hilt of her sword on her left hip with her right hand in order to draw it. Cobalt was similarly about to unsheathe her blade, but her right hand stopped just above the hilt. Her body had no head. It had been mercilessly ripped off her slender F-type neck, and the blood-colored damage effect shot up into the air from the cross section.

Cerberus stopped nearly ten meters to the left, and in his right hand, he held the double-horned head of Cobalt Blade.

Almost as if the BB system itself couldn't figure out what was going on, two whole seconds passed before the body and the head of Cobalt were enveloped in vivid blue flames. When the particles scattered, the death marker appeared where her body had been.

Cerberus stood up, blue flames lingering on his scythe-like fingers.

"M-monsteeeeerrrr!" After witnessing the beheading of her older sister, Manganese Blade roared loudly enough to make the debris on the floor of the crater shake.

She unsheathed her sword with a sharp *klak* and bounded off the floor, blade held above her head. Cerberus snapped his head to the right, an entirely inhuman movement, and kicked off the ground to charge her with just the power of his legs.

This time, Shihoko managed to see the attack, even though Manganese Blade's slash shot out so quickly that the blade nearly melted into a pale blue blur. However, she sensed something akin to leisure in Cerberus's reaction.

He caught the blade with a lazily outstretched hand as it swung toward his own head from the side, and Shihoko had a vision of the sword slicing through his thumb and into his forehead. But.

Keeen! The sharp screech of metal made the air in the crater squeal. Manga's blade stopped in midair, while Cerberus casually gripped half of it. The strange creaking sound was the blade trying to cut through his fingers.

And then she realized that it wasn't. With another wailing squeal, the blade shattered to pieces from the center.

The female warrior stared, stunned, while Cerberus kicked her in the side. Her peacock-blue armor shattered as abruptly as the sword, and Manganese was sent flying. She slammed into a mountain of debris to the rear and lay there, motionless.

She appeared to have escaped instant death, but even Shihoko and her limited experience fighting in the Unlimited Neutral Field was certain that the

warrior had basically nothing left in her health gauge. Perhaps intending to strike the killing blow, Cerberus sank down as he stared at Manganese. The thrusters on his back spread out with a *snap*.

But the charge did not happen.

Boooooom!

A cloud of dust puffed up in front of Cerberus. Not a bombardment or a bombing. Something—someone had plummeted out of the sky and just barely hit reverse in time to decelerate before slamming into the floor of the crater.

When the northern wind blew the dust away, Shihoko opened both eyes wide in surprise. Before the gray metal-color avatar, a silver metal-color avatar crouched on one knee, two pairs of wings spread wide.

“Haru,” Chiyuri murmured from Shihoko’s side, loud enough for only the two of them to hear.

It couldn't have taken more than ten seconds from the moment Haruyuki saw Cobalt Blade's death marker from the north side of the Chiyoda Ward office until the moment he landed at the crater that was once the Budokan. But during that brief time, Manganese Blade had been crushed and almost killed.

"Cerberus." Haruyuki desperately pushed back all his rage and frustration, his anxiety, confusion, and so many other emotions and called out to the metal color before him. "Can you hear me, Cerberus?"

He got no answer.

The right shoulder armor was closed, and the face visor was open, which meant that number one—the young boy personality Haruyuki had met the first time and dueled with several times—had taken center stage. But there was nothing but a reddish-black light swirling inside the visor; Haruyuki couldn't get any sense of the mind of a Burst Linker beyond it.

And he knew the true nature of that light: the very essence of negative Incarnate, accumulated in the "main body" at the Tokyo Midtown Tower via the countless ISS kits distributed in the Accelerated World.

The main body had been destroyed by Kuroyukihime and the Four Elements, but the Incarnate energy itself had been transferred to the Acceleration Research Society headquarters and poured into Niko's stolen Enhanced Armament to produce the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II. Lime Bell's Citron Call had disassembled and mostly taken back Mark II's massive body, on par with a Beast-class Enemy, but Cerberus was still equipped with the thruster alone when he'd disappeared.

The four protrusions on his back now were those very Invincible thrusters

transformed to match Cerberus's form, and they still housed the Incarnate energy of the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II. Essentially, the thrusters now fulfilled the same role as the Enhanced Armament Disaster that had been the vessel for the first Armor of Catastrophe, but the dark potential far surpassed that earlier model.

Cerberus's mind was being controlled by the Armor, just like the fifth Chrome Disaster, Cherry Rook's had been. This was the only conclusion Haruyuki could come to when he saw how ruthlessly, almost mechanically Cerberus had attacked the Coba-Manga sisters. Because Cerberus had been a true Burst Linker when they'd first met; he always made a point of respecting his duel opponent.

Haruyuki knew his friend was forever changed and yet he couldn't help but call out to him again. "Please. Answer me, Cerberus!"

The red light spilling out of his visor briefly grew brighter.

"Cerber—"

Whmp! That Haruyuki was able to guard with both arms against the blow launched at him with divine speed, fast enough to shred the air itself, was basically a miracle. Perhaps because his senses were still accelerated from his battle with Argon Array, he'd been able to sense the slight shift in Cerberus's center of gravity. But whether he guarded or not, the result was likely the same.

The metal armor of Silver Crow's arms shattered to pieces, together with the light-guiding crystals in his forearms, the instant the tungsten fist hit him. The impact was intense—he felt like he'd been hit in the face by the largest Enemy that roamed the Accelerated World. Unable to spread the wings on his back, much less brace himself, he flew backward and crashed into a pile of rubble on the south side of the arena. In the top left of his field of view, his health gauge was cut in half and dyed yellow.



Splayed out, his eyes flew open at the combination of the physical shock of the blow and the mental shock of his earnest plea not reaching Cerberus's ears. Cerberus took a step toward him, armor clanking, as he came in to finish Haruyuki off.

"Run, Crow," a hoarse voice told him.

Haruyuki managed to turn his eyes to the side at least and found Manganese Blade lying about three meters away. Her once-shiny Japanese-style armor was seriously damaged, and she'd been impaled on a piece of the building's skeleton sticking out of the rubble. If she'd had a sword, she could have cut the bar and escaped, but Haruyuki himself had witnessed Cerberus crushing her sword with his bare hand during the fight. Manganese had to have been in excruciating pain, equivalent to being injured in the same way in the real world. Haruyuki absolutely couldn't leave her like that.

He tried to pull himself to his feet, while in the corner of his eye, Cerberus leaned forward and extended the thrusters on his back. A single punch from a still position had snatched away half of his gauge; there was absolutely no way he could live through a charge. He would have to pull Manganese's body off the bar and escape somehow into the sky.

"Idiot. Run...," Manga said again, sounding pained, but Haruyuki ignored her plea as he wormed his way toward her intently.

And then Cerberus went flying just like Manganese had earlier. A second later, Haruyuki was assaulted by a metallic roar and the blue light of an impact wave.

A knight-type avatar in clear sapphire heavy armor stood where Cerberus had been only seconds before, shoulder forward in a charge position.

"Blue...King...," Haruyuki croaked.

"Vanquish" Blue Knight turned his chiseled face mask toward him for just an instant and gave Haruyuki a nod, and then glared straight ahead again before drawing the two-handed greatsword from the scabbard on his left hip.

More than twenty meters away, Wolfram Cerberus calmly pulled himself to his feet at the base of the exterior wall, his tungsten armor entirely undamaged.

Crimson light spilled out through the horizontal gap in his visor.

The Blue Knight and the gray wolf glared at each other briefly as though taking stock of the other's power. Their auras swelled up, and the air in the ruins crackled with electricity.

"Can you stand, Crow?" A familiar voice came from behind abruptly, and a blade changed into a slender hand to help him up.

Somehow getting to his feet, Haruyuki put his own hand over the hand that continued to support him. "Kuroyukihime..."

"You did well. Leave the rest to us," Kuroyukihime told him in a gentle, but resolute voice, and left Haruyuki to Lime Bell when she popped out from behind them.

Niko slid a dagger tinged with overlay through the bar that pierced Manganese Blade's torso, cutting into it like butter, and set the injured samurai on Pard's back.

"Honestly. You always do this," Chiyuri grumbled.

"Sorry," he replied, and looked at Kuroyukihime once more. "Um, Cerberus is..."

"I know." The swordmaster nodded. "I'll see if I can't separate him from the Enhanced Armament. But, Crow, your job here's not finished yet. Make sure you protect Bell."

"R-right!" he said, and then added as quietly as possible, "And Ivory Tower—no, Black Vise is still hiding in the shadows around there. Please watch out for him, too."

"Mmm. If he comes out of the shadows, I'll take care of him immediately." Kuroyukihime looked to the center of the crater, as though stretched to her limits, the tension in her nearly about to break.

Facing off against each other, Blue Knight and Wolfram Cerberus sprang forward simultaneously.

The Blue King's charge was so fast that Haruyuki's eyes, with his sensory acceleration released, could almost not perceive it. The king's massive bulk

turned into a sapphire-blue flowing line and disappeared. And then Haruyuki heard an earth-shaking roar.

Suddenly visible again ten meters to the right, the Blue King had brought his two-handed sword down about halfway. Cerberus's crossed arms had caught the large blade, like Haruyuki had earlier. But unlike Haruyuki, his gray heavy metal armor did not so much as crack. He was fully defending himself against the Blue King's superspeed charge and downward slash attack *from an Arc*.

"To stop that...," the Purple King murmured, having come to stand beside Kuroyukihime.

The Blue King's two-handed sword, the alpha of the Seven Arcs, Tensuu, the Impulse: One of the most powerful swords in the Accelerated World alongside Trilead Tetroxide's straightsword Infinity and Graphite Edge's dual swords Lux and Umbra.

Cerberus's tungsten armor might have been hard, but there was no way it should have been able to defend against a full-power slashing attack launched by a king with an Arc and remain completely unscathed. Which meant that super-high-level negative Incarnate was dramatically amplifying all of Cerberus's stats. Just like the former Chrome Disaster.

The Blue King continued to lean into his sword, adding power and weight as if to push his way through those crossed arms. Streams of orange sparks flowed from the point of contact between blade and armor, and rubble gradually slid up over Cerberus's feet.

Given that Cerberus was a pure fighting type, with no flying tools or secret tricks, he wouldn't be able to escape or counterattack from that position if he didn't repel the blade somehow. If it came down to a simple show of strength, the advantage was with the Blue King.

"*Wonderful, isn't it?*" a voice said from behind Haruyuki abruptly.

"Yes..." He nodded, his eyes held fast by the duel of the century. "That's the Blue King for you, though."

"*No, no, not the king. Him.*" A hint of excitement crept into the smooth, flat voice. "*That he would not retreat a step with Knight as his opponent! The result*

is even greater than I'd expected. It would be a pity to call him by numbers forever, though, wouldn't it? Let's give him a new name. How about...Wolfram Disaster?"

Here, finally, Haruyuki realized that the owner of the voice was not a Nega Nebulus comrade nor any of the other meeting participants. Whirling his head around, he shouted, "Where are you?!"

Still supporting him, Chiyuri jerked her head back. "Wh-what's wrong?!"

"Just now, Vise's voice..."

"Huh? I didn't hear anything?"

".....?"

He was baffled, but it seemed that Kuroyukihime, Niko, and the others watching the battle nearby hadn't heard anything, either. But it couldn't have been a hallucination. The sinister name *Wolfram Disaster* lingered in his ears.

"Cerberus...", Haruyuki murmured, clenching his fist.

The reason he had been calling the current Cerberus "Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II" was because he saw the real issue was the Enhanced Armament, in the end. He thought that if they could just take those thrusters and the negative Incarnate they contained, Cerberus would go back to his original self. Calling him "Wolfram Disaster" was basically the same as admitting that the change was irreversible. And there was absolutely no way he could do that.

Kuroyukihime had told him to protect Lime Bell so that they could watch for their chance to strip Niko's thrusters with Citron Call, this time for sure. And that moment was approaching second by second.

Perhaps no longer able to fight the Blue King's sword pressure, Cerberus shuddered. Crossed above his head, his arms were still holding the large sword at bay, but the bend in his knees was gradually getting deeper. Soon he would reach his limit and fall to the ground. That was when Lime Bell would take the stage.

Haruyuki couldn't allow Black Vise to get in the way of this once-in-a-lifetime chance from wherever he was hiding. Focusing a third of his concentration on

the fight in the center of the crater, he focused the other 70 percent on watching their surroundings and then waited intently for the moment to come.

The Impulse's blade and the tungsten armor squealed and scraped against each other. Rivers of sparks shot out in all directions, illuminating the faces of both fighters.

And then the deadlock finally broke.

A roar shot through Haruyuki's entire body, like a cannon firing. An ocean of smashed armor fragments danced up into the air, sparkling. When they caught the sunlight and glittered beautifully, he saw the color—a clear blue.

"What?!" Chiyuri cried out in surprise, clinging to him, and Haruyuki gasped sharply. The unbelievable scene from a second earlier replayed in the back of his mind.

Cerberus looked to have been on the verge of plunging to his knees on the ground, unable to resist the pressure of the Blue King's blade when his thrusters fired black flames for a mere instant. That was enough to bounce the Impulse up high into the air, and Cerberus used the opening to charge the king's wide-open chest with a head butt.

That head butt had shattered Frost Horn's shoulder armor in one blow in a duel with Wolfram Cerberus in Nakano Area No. 2 before and beaten Haruyuki back to the ground when he was about to take off into the sky. It had been Cerberus's key move since level one, and now with the propulsive power of the thrusters—no, with the power of the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II—this head butt had become a special-attack blow powerful enough to harm even the Blue King.

His thick armor shattered, Blue Knight was knocked backward more than ten meters above the debris on the ground, but almost as if he refused to fall even if the sky itself came down around his ears, he plunged the sword in his hand into the ground and braced himself. His injuries were not serious, but that blow had to have seriously decreased his health gauge.

"Honestly! Soft as always," the Purple King cursed.

"Knight's always refused to even think of using his own special attacks when

his opponent isn't using theirs," Kuroyukihime explained to Haruyuki and the others. "Naturally, the same goes for Incarnate techniques."

"We don't got time for that kinda noble attitude," Niko said. "Two, three more minutes, and we'll be up to our necks in the second wave of Enemies."

The Green King took a heavy step forward. "It is time for us to join forces and end this."

"That's the long and short of it."

The speaker wasn't the Purple King or the Black King or the Red King or the Green King, or even Black Vise, of course.

Poof! Ahead of the four kings, a cloud of yellow smoke puffed up, and the Yellow King, Yellow Radio, leisurely stepped out.

"H-hey! Where have you been?!" Purple Thorn yelled.

"Aah, well, it's rather embarrassing. I was caught up in the fall of the Budokan and wedged in amongst the rubble," he replied calmly, twirling the baton in his left hand around and around.

"The ruuuuubbbblille...," Lemon Pierrette said, from where she stood with Iron Pound and the others on the west side of the crater, sounding slightly exasperated.

Together at last, the five kings nodded at each other and then took an almost casual step forward. Clouds of dust puffed up at their feet as they moved so fast it seemed like they were teleporting, splitting up on either side to take on a hexagonal formation with the Blue King.

Standing in the center of the hexagon, Cerberus slowly moved his crimson goggles from side to side. Although he was surrounded by six level niners—without exaggeration the most powerful warriors in the Accelerated World—his posture did not change. He simply stood there, seemingly drained of strength.

Now that he was fused with the Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, Cerberus's battle power was indeed overwhelming. The very fact that he had been able to go one-on-one with the Blue King, the peak of close-range avatar power even without using his special attacks, was already utterly extraordinary. Even so,

there was just no way he could repel a simultaneous attack from six kings at once—he couldn't crush them all. And Black Vise, the person who had created this situation, had to have been only too aware of this.

In which case, the Restrainer's objective lay elsewhere. All Haruyuki could think of was that Vise would aim for the moment when the six kings were focused on Cerberus and target someone else in their group. Massive piles of debris littered the crater that had been the Budokan arena a half hour or so ago, and naturally, this rubble created dark shadows beneath it. If the voice whispering to Haruyuki earlier was real, then Black Vise had to have been hiding somewhere in those shadows with his Shadow Lurker ability, waiting for his moment to move.

Peeling his gaze away from the six kings and Cerberus, Haruyuki once again checked his surroundings. Lime Bell held him up on one side, and beside her was Chocolat Puppeteer, who had returned the five Chocopets to her special-attack gauge. To her right was Blood Leopard, bearing the gravely wounded Manganese Blade on her back, and Aster Vine. A little ways off in the western outer area, Iron Pound, Suntan Chafer, and Lemon Pierrette stood together.

Just as he had when he snatched Niko at Tokyo Midtown Tower, Vise was no doubt intending to trap someone in his thin panels and then sink into the shadows with them. He would then use that hostage as a shield and force them to call off the general attack on the White Legion. That was the worst-case scenario that Haruyuki could imagine.

But at the same time, Black Vise was also at his most vulnerable in the moment when he came out of the shadows to abduct someone. Just like his self-proclaimed student Shadow Cloaker, if the shadow was erased in that instant, he would be thrown up out of the ground, defenseless for a few seconds.

Haruyuki pushed aside the urge to focus on the battle between the kings and Cerberus, and concentrated the larger part of his attention at the feet of the deputies.

Before he knew it, a weighty silence fell over the crater. The intensity of the clash between the battle spirit of the fighters in the center drowned out even

the footsteps of the large Enemies approaching from the south.

There was no trigger. Without so much as eye contact, much less any signal, the six kings readied swords, shield, staff, baton, and gun, and glided inward in a high-speed charge to narrow the inner diameter of the hexagon in a perfectly synchronized movement.

There was already nowhere to run. Maybe straight up into the sky, but the kings had apparently also taken that option into consideration. Six immensely powerful weapons came down on the gray wolf from above as if to block off that particular route of escape.

But Cerberus didn't run. He braced his feet and clapped his fists together loudly in front of his stomach. The visor on his head was clamped shut, and even the zigzag line of his crimson goggles was narrowed: the activation motion for his Physical Immunity ability. A dark aura coiled thickly around him.

Instantly.

The six kings exploded in six directions at exactly the same time, not deviating from each other so much as a millisecond, and six different light effect colors dazzled the eye.

Although they were all normal attacks, the exquisite synchronization of the level niners would have amplified the force of a single blow by several orders of magnitude. Not to mention that the two-handed sword of the Blue King, the cross-shaped shield of the Green King, and the staff of the Purple King were three of the Seven Arcs, the most powerful Enhanced Armaments in the Accelerated World, while the Black King's limbs, naturally, but also the Red King's guns and the Yellow King's baton, didn't fall far behind the Arcs in terms of sheer power.

Meanwhile, Cerberus boosted the defensive power of his superhard tungsten armor and his Physical Immunity ability with his bottomless Incarnate energy. The Armor of Catastrophe, Mark II, had once withstood even a direct blow from Metatron's Trisagion.

The violent clash of raw attack power and absolute defense power was, contrary to Haruyuki's expectations, very quiet. Utterly soundless, without a single vibration or shock to shake the area. Rainbow flowers of light rippled

outward from the point of collision, an inky darkness swirling at their core. The six kings and Cerberus didn't so much as twitch, as if time had stopped in the center of the crater alone.

"Why is nothing happening?" Chiyuri whispered faintly.

"...The two forces are too powerful; the result's not coming," Haruyuki replied in a voice that was almost nonexistent. He didn't know if that was actually true, but he felt like it was, that the BB system itself was unable to process the clash of the strongest lance and the strongest shield. But he couldn't imagine that this state of suspended animation would continue forever. At some point, the system's scales would tip, and the contracted ball of ultimate energy would assault either Cerberus or the six kings. Unable to even take a breath, he simply waited for that moment.

It wasn't as though he had forgotten Black Vise was hiding somewhere around them. In fact, even while half his attention was stolen by the clash in the crater, the other half maintained its watch on his own feet and the feet of those around him. If even a single plank appeared from inside a shadow, he intended to charge, eliminate that shadow with Incarnate light, and yank the inky avatar out of the earth.

However.

Perhaps the kings poured even more power into their attack, because the violence of the rainbow light flashed even more brightly, and in that moment, Haruyuki turned his entire mind in that direction, albeit for a mere heartbeat of time.

As if carefully aiming for that moment, a voice called out with neither fight, nor fear, nor exultation, as if it were merely emotionlessly announcing a dull fact.

"Icosahedral Insulation."

This time, Chiyuri appeared to hear it, too, and her avatar shuddered against him.

Haruyuki ripped his attention away from the kings as thin black panels soundlessly appeared from shadows of the debris. But not at anyone's feet.

Twenty enormous thin panels rose up in a circle large enough to easily enclose everyone in the crater's center—Cerberus and the six kings, along with the other nine meeting members. Each panel was a perfect equilateral triangle, each side more than three meters long.

The massive triangles had no sooner lined up like interlocking gears to form a black wall than the circle's diameter began to shrink rapidly, kicking up rubble.

A restraint technique!!

Haruyuki hesitated for an instant about whether or not he should grab Chiyuri and escape from the triangular enclosure. It would be a repeat of when they had escaped from the combined Incarnate techniques of Snow Fairy and Glacier Behemoth in the Territories the previous day. The strong aversion he felt to once again abandoning his comrades and running away delayed his reaction.

Chiyuri's will, however, was rock solid. "Forget me. Fly out of here!" she shouted in his ear.

"But—!" He started to argue with her, and then one of the triangles that made up the black wall touched his back.

The panels themselves seemed to have no attack power, but they were relentless and unyielding as they pushed him and Chiyuri toward the center of the crater, whether they liked it or not. Choco screamed, while Pound and Chafer on the left and Leopard and Vine on the right tried to push the panels back with shoulders, heads, and hands, but even the high rankers' physical strength wasn't enough to slow the contraction of the circle.

The six kings, too, must have noticed by now the black wall surrounding them. But if the balance of their synchronized attack tipped even slightly in any single direction, all the power concentrated in that one point would bounce back, and kings though they might have been, they would still be hit with serious damage. That said, if the circle shrank completely, the same result was inevitable.

...No.

Haruyuki couldn't believe Black Vise's objective was simply to push everyone into the same spot and kill them in an explosion of the kings' attack power. He must have had some kind of other plan for them. So maybe Haruyuki should

actually escape while Vise's intentions were still unclear. But. But.

Unable to decide, he was shoved forward by the triangular panels.

"Crow! Hurry!" Chiyuri shouted, and then shook off his arm as she fought against the wall's contraction with her back before leaping toward the center of the circle with everything she had.

"Go, Corvus!" Choco called from behind.

"You have to go!" Pard snapped, her voice beating at his back.

A mere five meters ahead, the kings gathered ever more strength to try and break through Cerberus's defenses. The six surging beams of light mixed together into a pillar to shoot straight up, and at its base, the dark aura cloaking Cerberus writhed violently as if it were alive.

From Haruyuki's position, he could see Niko's face in profile and Kuroyukihime's half-mirrored goggles. Their voices echoed in his mind.

"Fly, Crow!"

"You gotta go!"

".....Hrn!!"

Gritting his teeth, he spread his wings and glared up.

Instantly, almost as if to obstruct his escape, the triangular panels slid upward as they continued to contract. The circle slowly transformed into a half sphere, blocking the sky above.

Haruyuki kicked off the ground with everything he had and spread the metal wings damaged by Argon Array's laser, along with the unharmed Metatron Wings.

"Hngaaaaaah!!" Transforming his helplessness into a howl of rage, Haruyuki ascended at full speed. The hole in the sphere was getting smaller and smaller before his eyes. He folded his wings up into the most acute angle he could manage, stretched his arms out straight, and charged toward the yellow-green sky he could see on the other side of the hole.

His vibrating metal fins came into contact with the edge of the triangular

panels, generating an earsplitting screech and rivers of sparks. Two of his outermost fins were torn off, but in return, Haruyuki just barely made it out of the black semisphere. He immediately spread all four wings to decelerate and then quickly flipped around and stared at the half-sphere below him.

The hole he had shot out of had already vanished, and there was no way to see inside the black walls. The only way to escape the obsidian prison would have been to dig into the earth of the crater.

No, wait.

The triangles kept moving, and the bottom edge of the half sphere started to fold inward. *Krak, krak!* The rubble in and around it was crushed, pulverized, and the ends of the triangles came together until finally, they joined up to produce a complete sphere buried in the ground.

A completely closed-off space made up of twenty equilateral triangles. Icosahedron. Locked away inside this space, just under six meters across, were the six kings and eight Legion members, together with Cerberus. And the kings were clashing at full power in the center. If that superpowered energy was released inside the closed-off space...

Haruyuki felt a twinge of fear.

Zzzzzmmm! He heard the heavy roar of an explosion, and the icosahedron shook violently.

“Ah...Aaaah!” Raising his voice in an anguished cry, Haruyuki once again spread his wings. His misgivings of only a second earlier had become reality.

If they had broken through Cerberus’s defenses, the larger portion of the attack power would have been absorbed by Cerberus and his health gauge, so there wouldn’t have been an explosion loud enough for Haruyuki to hear. Which meant that the kings must have indeed lost their precarious balance, causing the blast. Unfathomable energy was raging in that closed space at that very moment.

Would Kuroyukihime and the others manage to live through it somehow, despite the serious damage they would no doubt take? Or would they die, unable to fully withstand the blow? From outside the icosahedron, he couldn’t

even confirm whether they lived or died.

Haruyuki clenched his fists. His only option was to destroy it.

A normal attack was obviously no good. But he probably wouldn't be able to so much as scratch it with his special-attack Head Butt or his Enhanced Armament Lucid Blade, either. The only thing that had a chance of doing any damage was an Incarnate technique, but in the metal forest to the south of the Budokan site, a number of massive shadows twisted and squirmed. Large Enemies drawn in by the Incarnate power of Argon Array and Cerberus. If Haruyuki used an Incarnate technique, they would target him. Even still...

He took a deep breath, exhaled, and gained altitude. From the pace of the Enemy advance, he'd have just one chance. He had to smash the icosahedron in one full-powered attack. Changing his clenched fists into sword hands, he brought up a faint overlay and spread his wings as far as possible.

"Corvus! No!" a voice from behind shouted, just as he was on the verge of executing his do-or-die charge.

Haruyuki quickly turned around and saw flowing metal hair fluttering and the pale blue light of injection flames charging toward him. Sky Raker, whom he had parted with at the Chiyoda Ward office.

"M-Master!" he shouted.

Raker stopped a mere five meters in front of him, cut her boosters, and applied the air brakes with arms spread. Even so, her avatar arrived with a fair amount of force, and Haruyuki unthinkingly embraced her to bring her to a stop.

"Master! Kuroyukihime and the others!" Haruyuki cried hoarsely.

"I'm aware of the situation." Fuko nodded deeply. "I thought someone might regenerate Argon, so I was keeping watch on her death marker. I never dreamed that this would happen here..."

"I-inside that shell, Kuroyukihime and Bell and Choco and Rain and Pard... Everyone who was at the meeting is locked up in there. And the simultaneous attack of the six kings exploded in there...Wh-what if everyone—?"

“Calm down, Corvus.” Fuko wrapped her arms around him tightly. “That black ball is the manifestation of Black Vise’s rejection. Most likely, a third-stage Incarnate technique like Graph’s Elucidator. Unfortunately, neither of our Incarnates will work against that. If we force an attack, we’ll only take damage from the blowback.”

“Th-third stage?!” Pushed to a new level of despair, Haruyuki stared once more at the black ball below.

Up to that point, he had witnessed two of Black Vise’s affiliated Incarnate techniques. The first was Hexahedral Compression, which Haruyuki himself up had been locked up in. The second was Octahedral Isolation, which Vise had used when he’d stolen Niko’s Enhanced Armament. Both techniques boasted a fearsome strength, and if Haruyuki hadn’t had help from Kuroyukihime and Takumu, he couldn’t have broken through them.

There were only five types of regular polyhedrons: tetrahedron, cube, octahedron, dodecahedron, and icosahedron. Considering this, it wouldn’t have been at all strange if the Icosahedral Insulation before them was Black Vise’s most powerful restraining Incarnate technique.

Having thought this far, Haruyuki abruptly realized something and sent his gaze racing across the ground around them. “Right. Vise himself, creating this icosahedron!”

He would have had to come out from the shadows to maintain the activation of the Incarnate technique. If they could find and defeat him, the icosahedron would also naturally vanish. Or so he assumed. Or perhaps hoped. But.

“That’s probably hopeless, too,” Fuko sighed.

“Huh?! Wh-why...?” Haruyuki was dumbfounded.

Fuko took her hand from his back and pointed to the black sphere. “I looked for him from the air, too, but I couldn’t so much as sense his presence. I’m sure Black Vise is using the panels of his own body to make that thing. His avatar doesn’t exist outside the shell.”

“Th-that’s...”

If that were the case, then Icosahedral Insulation was simultaneously the

ultimate restraining technique and a peerless defense technique. Because it transformed Vise's own body into an indestructible prison.

While watching over the battle of the six kings, Haruyuki had guessed that Black Vise intended to abduct someone from the shadows. But that had been a serious miscalculation. It hadn't been just one person—he'd wanted all of them. Vise had planned to restrain everyone at the meeting of the Seven Kings with his own most powerful Incarnate technique, using Wolfram Cerberus as bait. If Haruyuki had only reached this conclusion earlier, it might have been possible to avoid the situation they found themselves in now.

He shook with enough self-reproach and regret to gouge his heart out, and Fuko squeezed his shoulder firmly.

"Calm down. If...Even if in the worst-case scenario, Lotus and everyone have been annihilated, that doesn't mean that everything is finished."

"Huh?"

"This is the Unlimited Neutral Field. Everyone will come back to life in an hour. And there are six Kings of Pure Color in there. I don't know about Radio and Thorn, but at the very least Originators Knight and Grandé should be able to use third-stage Incarnate techniques."

"...Originators..." Naturally, it wasn't the first time he'd heard this word. When Niko appeared suddenly at Haruyuki's house after the first meeting of the Seven Kings five weeks earlier, she talked as though she'd lost all confidence in herself, speaking of the Originators as monsters. Four days after that, he'd encountered the Green King at Roppongi Hills in the Unlimited Neutral Field, where he'd told Haruyuki that he was himself an Originator.

It was ironic that the power of the Blue and Green Kings that had frightened Niko was now their last hope. But given that Haruyuki and Fuko could do nothing from the outside, they had no choice but to trust the rest to the oldest of the kings. The problem was that if even the kings had died in the explosion in the closed space, they would regenerate in an hour, but Argon Array and Shadow Cloaker would come back to life before that. Haruyuki and Fuko's job now was to keep those two from getting in the way of everyone's escape.

Having somehow managed to find something for them to do, Haruyuki

started to move his gaze away from the inky black icosahedron and toward the skyscraper in the east.

But before he could say anything, Fuko spoke quietly once more. “Although.”

“Huh...?”

“Vise would know that, too. I find it hard to imagine that he seriously believes he could hold the kings forever even if they used a third-stage Incarnate technique.”

“R-right.” He brought his gaze back to the black prison and nodded. “And even if they don’t have an automatic safety cutoff set, at some point, someone is going to take off a Neurolinker in the real world. And then the kings’ avatars will disappear. He would have to stay in the Unlimited Neutral Field for a whole day—two years and two hundred seventy days on this side,” he noted, having become fairly accustomed to the acceleration calculation. “But not knowing when the kings would return, there’s no way he could just sit and wait for years with this third-stage Incarnate technique activated.”

“Yes, I also don’t think that Vise’s abilities extend that far,” Fuko agreed. “But in that case...In that case.” She dropped her voice to the lowest volume possible, and her voice became even more strained. “What if there’s still—?”

It was then that the dry wind carried a voice to them down from above where they hovered in the air.

“What? ...You’re not going to help your comrades? ...How heartless.”

“Nngh?!” Haruyuki shot back in retreat and then looked up into the sky to see a small shadow about thirty meters away in the western sky.

No, it wasn’t a shadow. When it caught the sunlight, strong for the Purgatory stage, its entire body glittered, dazzlingly bright. The duel avatar was probably M type and definitely a metal color. The color of the reflected light was a silver more clear than Silver Crow’s. And he was floating in the air like Haruyuki and Fuko because he was riding on the back of a horse with large wings.

When Kuroyukihime had raced back from her school trip in Okinawa to rescue Haruyuki and Takumu after they’d been backed up against a wall by Dusk Taker, she had been riding a horse that was entirely black with pale flames on its

hooves—an Enemy with the ability to fly.

The horse the silver avatar straddled was likely the same type of Enemy, but its coat and mane were white as snow, with a hint of red in the gently flapping wings and the tip of the long tail. The rider gripped the reins that stretched out from the black bridle on the horse's head.

Haruyuki was about to demand the intruder identify themselves, but Fuko's sharp voice beat him to it.

“Platinum Cavalier!”

Haruyuki knew that name. It had been inscribed on the first line of the list of Oscillatory Universe members hurriedly given out for the Territories the previous day. In other words, the first of the Seven Dwarves, nickname: Bashful or Basher. The most powerful attacker in the White Legion.

As if responding to the shiver of fear that shot through Haruyuki, the clouds roiling in the sky above suddenly grew thicker, and the strong sunlight of the Purgatory stage waned. The light reflecting off the knight straddling the winged horse also waned, revealing the avatar's form.

Helmet with long decorative horns stretching out and an armor design of mainly curving lines. Large shield on his back, left hip equipped with a slender longsword with a cross-shaped sword guard. A knight. There was no word more suitable to describe him.

Vanquish Blue Knight was of course the standard bearer when it came to knight avatars in the Accelerated World, but Platinum Cavalier's metal armor was much more knightlike than that of the Blue King. When the Oscillatory members list had been passed out, Haruyuki had looked into the names out of curiosity. The origin of the word *knight* was the Old English *cniht* meaning “servant,” while in contrast, *cavalier* had its origins in the French *chevalier*, meaning “horse-mounted soldier.”

That wasn't necessarily the reason for it, but the figure on the horse Enemy was simply so gracefully elegant that it was hard to imagine another avatar that better suited the name, and the clear platinum gleam of his armor, likely on the left edge of the metal color chart, the pinnacle of precious metals, stole Haruyuki's eyes and attention, albeit if only for an instant.

As if to cover for his absentmindedness, Fuko quickly raised a hand and brought up a thin overlay.

Incarnate techniques were only to be used when attacked with Incarnate first. Fuko herself had told him this when she taught him how to use the Incarnate System. And yet, now that very same Fuko was not only using an Incarnate technique, but moving to strike first against Platinum Cavalier, who hadn't so much as lifted a finger. In other words, he was that powerful of an opponent.

"You didn't take part in the Territories yesterday," Fuko snapped, her sword hand turned toward Cavalier. "And yet you appear here now. So you're just Ivory Tower's—no, Black Vise's pawn in the end, hmm?"

Cavalier, who seemed to know Sky Raker as Rose Milady had, shrugged slightly. "That you would say that is surprising and regrettable...My swordmaster is the White King and her alone...I came today under her orders...I do not follow that pointy head..." The knight let the last word of each sentence linger in the air.

"Then leave immediately!" Fuko cut into those lingering notes. "Black Vise is out of control. After his true identity was found out, he attacked all six of the kings. Once we deal with the situation here, all the Legions will attack Oscillatory. As the head of the Seven Dwarves, you must have other things you need to run off and do!"

"And would that be...for instance...urging our general members to leave to protect them from the attack...perhaps...?"

"That's what you'd do if you cared about your comrades. Vise has succeeded in locking up the six kings and their deputies, but that's not even a real stopgap. The kings will escape from that cage sooner rather than later, and then the joint subjugation mission will begin." Her tongue was sharp, but Fuko's explanation held a note of real concern. "You won't be able to fight back, no matter how many powerful members Oscillatory has. In which case, at least those Legion members who follow Cosmos without knowing the truth—"

"Impossible." Cavalier cut her off with a single word.

"Why?!"

“For instance, the six kings...No, I suppose it’s five now...At any rate, even if we are attacked by the kings’ Legions and no one is able to flee...no member would dream of leaving Oscillatory...And also, you know, Sky Raker...You’ve made one serious misunderstanding...”

“Misunderstanding?” Fuko parroted doubtfully.

Platinum Cavalier glanced at Haruyuki, who was holding her up, before almost sighing. “Once we deal with the situation here...That is indeed what you said, yes...But things won’t proceed like that...In the Accelerated World, hopeful calculations are always betrayed...No matter how you imagine the worst, the result is always worse, sadder, emptier...”

The knight’s words were painfully pessimistic, but they sounded familiar to Haruyuki. He dug through his memories, and the voice of Argon Array in the battle earlier came back to life in the back of his mind.

I mean, a way to save someone, there ain’t no such thing in this world. Like, right from the very start and beginnin’, there was no salvation.

All that there was was hatred, fighting, betrayal, fraud, violation, lament, despair, et cetera, et cetera. I’ll teach you boys right now. Just how cruel the Accelerated World really is.

As soon as she’d told him this, Argon had called up the copy of Dusk Taker’s personality that lived in Wolfram Cerberus’s right shoulder. And that had indeed been a phenomenon that far surpassed any worst-case scenario Haruyuki could have imagined.

This Dusk Taker re-creation was swallowed up and destroyed by the negative Incarnate energy transferred from the ISS kit main body, and now the personality of Orchid Oracle lived in Cerberus’s right shoulder. It was unclear what had happened to the real Oracle, but for her close friend Kuroyukihime, this could easily have been said to be a worst-case development. There was no way he could accept anything worse happening. He couldn’t let anything worse happen. No matter what.

“Platinum Cavalier,” Haruyuki called out to the shining knight, a high ranker of much greater standing than himself, as he roused his energy and battle spirit. “If you’re planning to get in our way, then we will defeat you here and now. I’m

sick of Black Vise and the Acceleration Research Society leading us around by the nose. What they're—no, *you're* doing is bad. And you know that, too!" He lifted his hand and brought up a silver overlay in the outstretched tips of his fingers, just as Fuko had.

Cavalier didn't react to this warning of an advance Incarnate attack. He didn't draw his sword, and he also showed no sign of moving away from that spot. "...Indeed, I can't find any fondness for Vise's actions...But you see, newbie...He is paying the price in his own way..."

The knight turned his tapered visor toward the icosahedron on the ground.

"He cannot release the Icosahedral Insulation under his own power...Although it is an Incarnate created to be unbreakable by anyone, once it is activated, he cannot go back to being a duel avatar unless someone breaks it for him...Having faith only in your enemies when you do not trust any of your allies, don't you think a person like that is strange...?"



“.....” At a loss for words, Haruyuki stared at the inky black sphere half-buried in the center of the crater. Even if what Cavalier was saying was true, it was still absolutely no reason to sympathize with Vise. In fact, Haruyuki should have been thinking about a way to use this information.

If Vise couldn't return to human form from the icosahedron under his own power, then they might be able to seal him in the Unlimited Neutral Field forever if they could rescue the Kings and everyone inside somehow and then completely isolate the sphere. But a way to get the Kings and deputies outside without smashing the icosahedron...

“Master.” He had a sudden flash of insight, and spoke to Fuko in a tone too quiet for anyone else to overhear. “If we rolled that icosahedron somewhere else, what would happen to the death markers inside?”

“That's...” Her madder-red eye lenses narrowed momentarily. “Death markers have no materiality, so it's impossible to destroy or move them. That's an absolute rule of Brain Burst. Of course, perhaps no rule is absolute if someone with the power to interfere with the system comes along, like Orchid Oracle. But at the very least, I can't imagine Vise has that power. In other words...If we could move the icosahedron, the markers might slip through the wall and stay where they are.”

“In which case!” Haruyuki's voice grew loud for an instant and he earnestly suppressed it as he continued. “If we move that ball to a place no one can get near—like if we drop it into the super-gravity moat of the Castle, we could maybe leave Vise in ball form forever.”

“To be more precise, until someone removes his Neurolinker in the real world,” Fuko noted, and Haruyuki was completely taken aback.

He had basically never thought about it, but it was true that in the real world, Black Vise/Ivory Tower was probably a kid around his age, and if he stayed in a full dive for several hours, his family would try to remove his Neurolinker from his neck. Or else, given that he was the very person who had arranged this trap, it was also likely that he had set an automatic cutoff safety in advance.

So it won't work. Haruyuki sighed.

“But there is perhaps value in trying it.” Fuko gripped his shoulder tightly. “Even if it is a third-stage Incarnate technique, the absolute theory means he must be mustering all of his defensive power. If you and I push it as hard as we can, we might be able to move the ball.”

“If we could move it just five meters, we could get everyone’s markers out at the very least.”

“Yes. But...What will Cavalier do?” Fuko’s voice was even more hushed.

“True.” Haruyuki shifted his gaze to the winged horse in the sky above the dome.

The platinum knight remained in the position where he had appeared. Still holding the reins in his hands, he showed no sign of reaching for the shield on his back or the sword at his hip. He said he had come on the order of the White King, but what instructions had he received exactly?

“Let’s ignore him.” Fuko’s words were full of a strong resolve.

Haruyuki blinked rapidly. “Huh...?”

“As far as I know, Cavalier doesn’t have any long-range, long-distance techniques. If he’s simply here as an observer, there’s no point in fighting him, and if he’s not, we can attack once we see him move.”

It was indeed just as she said. If he were a simple observer, then he could continue to carry out his duty in ghost form if he were to die.

“Understood,” Haruyuki said, and Fuko nodded wordlessly before starting a short countdown.

“Two, one, zero.”

Instantly, he dropped the thrust in his wings to zero. Quickly changing position in free fall, he plummeted toward the icosahedron on the ground. He slammed into the side of the sphere with so much force that if he were going any faster, he would have been the one to take damage, and then he pushed with his hands and right shoulder.

“Unh...Aaaaaah!” he howled.

“Haaaaaaah!” Fuko called out from his left side, having reignited her Gale

Thruster.

The pale light shining from Silver Crow's wings and the blue injection flames gushing from Sky Raker's thrusters stretched out and squealed in resonance. The hardness of the Icosahedral Insulation he felt against his hands was even greater than he'd imagined. He'd been able to feel a bit of give, a little creaking with the Hexahedral Compression and Octahedral Isolation. But the inky equilateral triangles that made up this icosahedron were not simply black panels—they communicated a feeling of rejection so absolute it might sever its attachment to the world itself.

But they weren't intending to destroy the third-stage Incarnate technique.

Don't break it, move it.

If they could push it a mere five meters from its present location, the death markers inside would slip through the panels and remain in this spot. And if they could keep pushing it all the way to the Castle in the south, they could drop it off the cliff where an inescapably strong gravity field waited and maybe make it impossible for Black Vise to do anything for a while.

Move...Move...Move...!!

Prepared to use up all the special-attack gauge he'd only just fully charged in the fight with Argon Array, Haruyuki mustered up every bit of thrust possible. A sea of white photons flowed out from his Metatron Wings, brilliantly lighting up the massive amounts of debris covering the ground.

"...M...ove...!" Unable to withstand the pressure he himself was producing, the metal armor wrapped around Silver Crow's hands began to crack.

"Move...!" Fuko squeezed out, and Gale Thruster roared, its operation pushed past its limits.

Haruyuki felt the massive icosahedron move a little, just a tiny bit. And then he heard two voices on top of each other.

"Get away from there, servant!!"

The voice of the Archangel Metatron echoed in his head, even though she was supposed to be resting at the top of the distant old Tokyo Tower.

“And this is the worst case that surpasses the worst case...”

The voice of Platinum Cavalier, still in the sky far above, reached him faintly over the sound of his own exertions.

Stuck between the instinct to obey Metatron’s order and the logic that the sphere would move if he just kept pushing a little harder, Haruyuki turned his gaze up at the sky.

Straddling the winged horse, the knight brandished a hand high in the air. Clutched in it was the silver longsword still tucked away in its scabbard.

No.

The cross-shaped protrusion he could see on the hilt and the guard was a little too short to hold in a hand. That wasn’t a sword—it was a staff.

“The Luminary?” Fuko murmured, barely audible.

The cross decorating the tip of the staff emitted a dazzling light, and the sky split.

The thick clouds above the crater ripped apart, and as they instantly evaporated, a massive—a *too* massive—fireball appeared. The roar easily drowned out the sound of his wings and her thrusters, shaking heaven and earth and causing a white halation of Haruyuki’s field of view.

“The sun...”

Is falling. His words were swallowed up by the incredible shaking of the earth. His special-attack gauge emptied, the firing of Gale Thruster stopped, and he and Fuko slid down the surface of the icosahedron.

“That’s not the sun,” she said, in a hoarse voice, firmly clutching his hand. “That’s...the Legend-class Enemy, Inti...”

Haruyuki knew the name. An Enemy with power on par with the Four Gods and the Four Saints, one the Anomaly Graphite Edge had died once trying to defeat without damaging it at all. The incarnation of destruction, impervious to every attack, burning to death without exception any and all who approached, and now it was dropping toward the icosahedron charring even the air. The information pressure was so absolute that Haruyuki was convinced that even a

third-stage rejection Incarnate was helpless against it.

He realized that the enormous fireball, twenty meters across, had a thin silver ring wrapped around it. The structure of countless thorns was exactly the same as the item that had been embedded in the forehead of Metatron's first form when she was forced to guard Tokyo Midtown Tower. He didn't understand why it didn't melt in Inti's heat, but there was no mistake that this was the restraint tool that the delta of the seven stars, the Arc Luminary, used to control Enemies.

What would happen when everyone was swallowed up by the heart of the Sun God Inti, a creature so powerful they couldn't even approach it without dying? And then when Inti didn't move from that spot? He didn't have to think hard about the answer to those questions. Naturally, his friends would face instant death, but not just instant death—when they regenerated an hour later, they would be instantly burned to ash again, a cycle that would be endlessly repeated. A perfect Unlimited Enemy Kill.

This was the true nature of the trap Black Vise had set. His real aim hadn't been to restrain the members of the meeting of the Seven Kings, but to annihilate them in an Unlimited EK.

"Corvus!" Fuko shouted, and pressed her hands to his chest.

They couldn't fly anymore, and they didn't have enough time to run. Haruyuki knew that Fuko was going to knock him flying with a palm strike to get him out of Inti's instant death range.

No. I'm not going anywhere. If there's no way to rescue Kuroyukihime, Chiyuri, Niko, and everyone else, then I want to die with them here. Haruyuki shook off this suicidal desire with his meager willpower. Nothing would come of such meaningless self-satisfaction. He and Fuko at least had to make it out of this trap alive.

"Master!" Haruyuki shouted and held her tightly in both arms. He had used up his special-attack gauge, and there wasn't enough time to focus his Light Speed imagination. But he still had the snowy white wings that were proof of his bond with Metatron. And given that he hadn't used them in the Territories the day before, Black Vise couldn't have known about them.

Haruyuki had never used the Enhanced Armament Metatron Wings as a single unit alone before. When he'd slipped through the God Seiryu's heat wave, when he'd gotten the jump on Argon Array's omnidirectional laser, he'd used them like an assist booster. So he didn't really know how much speed they could produce as a stand-alone unit, but he would have to have faith now.

"Fly!" Haruyuki's thought became light and gushed from the white wings.

Boom! A shock raced through him, and the intense Gs of acceleration made the joints of his avatar squeal. Flying diagonally upward like a rocket, their feet were scorched by the descending Inti's flames, instantly becoming red-hot.

As he watched his health gauge drop abruptly in the corner of his eye, Haruyuki flew and flew ever upward with all his might. If Fuko hadn't shouted "We're good now!" he might have made it all the way to the clouds.

Switching control from Metatron Wings back to his own wings, he shifted into a hovering mode just as the giant ball of white-hot flames made soundless contact with the jet-black icosahedron.

The scattered mountains of debris on the crater floor and the remaining shell of an outer wall instantly went up in flames. Laid bare, the silver earth grew red-hot before his eyes.

Five seconds.

That was the amount of time that Black Vise's third-stage Incarnate technique could withstand the flames of the Sun God Inti. Rather than melt in the heat, the triangles that made up the icosahedron shattered into pieces like glass. The fragments were enveloped in white flames and condensed into a single point to produce a tusk-colored death marker.

Haruyuki expected the death markers of the six kings, their eight deputies, and Cerberus to also appear from inside the shattered prison. But he was wrong.

He could only identify two death markers, one green and one gray. Green Grandé's and Cerberus's. The Green King had likely used his own body to defend against the huge explosion that ripped through the interior of the icosahedron.

Four of the five surviving kings launched major techniques toward the north side of the crater simultaneous with the destruction of the icosahedron, almost as if they had anticipated Inti's descent. Blue, purple, yellow, and black auras shot out, spiraling into a vortex to gouge out a temporary tunnel in the Sun God's flames, the pressure generated from the kings' techniques slightly buffering the speed of their descent.

A crimson shadow raced through the escape route created by the four kings. The Red King slid across the incandescent earth with her movement expansion Incarnate technique Pyro Planing. She was pulling something like a massive casting net in both hands, with Lime Bell, Chocolat Puppeteer, Manganese Blade, Lemon Pierrette, Iron Pound, and Aster Vine stuffed inside. The net had apparently been made by Vine with her whip. Plus, Blood Leopard in Beast Mode and a brown beetle—probably Suntan Chafer's transformed figure—were pushing the net from behind.

They hadn't given up. Even trapped inside that indestructible sphere, they had somehow guessed at Inti's descent and come up with a strategy to escape.

"F-fight!!" Haruyuki shouted, lost in the moment, and almost as if they heard him, Rain glided ahead even faster. But the path the kings had carved out was quickly closing, and white flames licked at Leopard and Chafer in the rear. Their armor began to melt and char, and their speed grew duller.

"Leopard!!" Fuko shouted, as a green light shot out from inside the net to envelop them. The light that revived the burned-out avatars in the blink of an eye was no doubt Lime Bell's Citron Call. When he looked, he saw that the other Burst Linkers in the net weren't simply being carried along, but earnestly working to push back Inti's flames in their own ways.

The large fireball of Inti's main body had a radius of about ten meters, with an ultra-hot death zone of another ten meters around that. Rain and the group raced through the twenty-meter escape route, and then advanced another few seconds before collapsing in a pile on the gray earth.

As if they had been waiting for the survival of these nine avatars, flames of blue, yellow, purple, and black shot up high into the air.

"Kuroyukihime!" Haruyuki's shriek was drowned out by the roar of the Sun

God Inti slamming into the ground. The area around it instantly melted and boiled to produce a lake of bright red magma.

With teary eye lenses, Haruyuki stared at the western sky. Just as when he'd arrived, the platinum knight on the winged horse had vanished at some point.

By the time Haruyuki opened his eyes in the rear seat of the EV, Fuko was already leaning over into the passenger seat to gently pull Kuroyukihime's Neurolinker off her neck.

The body leaning against the seat back shuddered, and a faint sigh came from the pale face in profile. Her eyelashes slowly lifted and she blinked several times before sitting up. Kuroyukihime looked at each of them in turn, and then said calmly, "Everyone, well done in surviving."

He felt like he had to say something, but he couldn't find the words. It was true that Haruyuki, Chiyuri, Fuko, and Shihoko had managed to survive the Unlimited EK trap set by the White Legion and Black Vise, but the five kings, including Kuroyukihime and Grandé—who had already been struck down with Cerberus—had been swallowed up in the center of the Sun God Inti and died instantly in order to ensure the safe escape of the other nine Burst Linkers.

In the Unlimited Neutral Field, Haruyuki and Fuko had joined up with Niko and the others, and waited for Cobalt Blade to regenerate just barely outside Inti's heat-death zone thanks to the fact that she had been instantly killed by Wolfram Cerberus. They held the barest minimum of a meeting before moving to the portal on the first floor of the Chiyoda Ward office building and returning to the real world. Although they had to have regenerated a little before Cobalt, Argon Array and Shadow Cloaker were nowhere to be seen.

Haruyuki and his comrades had been able to leave normally, but that sadly wasn't the case for Kuroyukihime after she'd been swallowed up by the immobile Inti. Because Fuko had moved with top speed the second she woke up to remove their Legion Master's Neurolinker, the death marker would disappear from the Unlimited Neutral Field for the time being, but the next time she used the Unlimited Burst command, she would die instantly.

"Sacchi," Fuko murmured and a transparent droplet slid soundlessly down her cheek. Seeing this, the three in the back seat held their collective breath.

“Sacchi...I was supposed to protect you whatever happened and yet...”

“Hey, hey. That’s a bit over-the-top, Fuko.” Smiling wryly, Kuroyukihime lifted a hand and gently wiped Fuko’s eyes with her fingertip. “I merely died once in the Unlimited Neutral Field. That is absolutely no obstacle to duels in the normal field or the Territories, and the joint subjugation mission against the White Legion will be carried out as planned. In fact, thanks to Vise playing a card like that, the unified will of the five Legions is rock solid now. This meeting of the Seven Kings was our win.”

She turned to look into the back seat.

“Shihoko, Chiyuri, Haruyuki, well done. I think Black Vise’s aim was actually you more than the kings. As your Legion Master, I am very proud that you all survived in such a situation without losing a single person. And...did the forced cutoff for Knight, Grandé, Radio, and Thorn make it in time?”

Chiyuri and Shihoko both had tears in their eyes and neither looked ready to speak anytime soon, so Haruyuki took the lead in answering Kuroyukihime’s question. Of course, his own chest was pretty full, too, but he pushed that down and worked to keep his voice under control.

“Y-yes. The Blue King dived with Coba-Manga, the Purple King with Vine, and the Yellow King with Pierrette, so they said they would be able to remove their Neurolinkers right away. The Green King was alone, but Pound said he has something like a forced cutoff safety, and he’ll be fine.”

“Mmm, I see. I thought Radio would be in more danger than Grandé, but I see that he and Pierrette are close enough to dive from the same location.”

Haruyuki suddenly remembered the Yellow King’s surprising weakness revealed during the meeting.

“I secretly asked while we were waiting for Cobalt to regenerate,” Chiyuri said brightly, as she rubbed at her eyes with one hand. “I guess Pierrette is Radio’s actual little sister!”

“Oh-ho, makes sense then. In which case, I suppose they’re also parent and child...” Kuroyukihime nodded.

If that’s the case, we can relax. Wait. Can we relax? he asked himself.

“Um.” Shihoko timidly raised her hand. “I’m glad the kings were all able to cut off their connections, but there were two others caught up inside Inti, weren’t there? Wolfram Cerberus and Black Vise. It’s not that I’m worried about them, but I was just wondering how they plan to escape the Unlimited EK.”

“Oh. True,” Haruyuki muttered.

Fuko peered at him from the driver’s seat. Her eyes were still a little red, but her usual gentle smile had returned to her lips. “Corvus should know the answer to that.”

“Huh? Um, uhh...” He groaned, and a silver silhouette rose up in the back of his mind. The platinum knight brandishing the long, slender staff. “Oh! Right! ... He can make Inti do whatever he wants, so he can just move Inti while you’re all gone from the Unlimited Neutral Field and then move it back to its original location after Vise and Cerberus regenerate.”

“Ohh, is that it?” Shihoko nodded and then quickly added, “So then if we can detect that timing, it would be possible for Kuroyukihime and the others to dive in the moment that Inti moves and escape from the Unlimited EK, right?”

“Mmm. In theory, that is indeed the case. But it would be hard to put into practice. We would have to intently monitor Inti in the Unlimited Neutral Field without them noticing, and I would have to always be ready to accelerate on this side.”

Shihoko’s shoulders slumped. “I suppose so.”

“It’s okay, Choco.” Haruyuki unconsciously put his hand on her uniformed back. “If we put our powers together, I just know we’ll be able to get Kuroyukihime and the others out. And it’s not like Inti’s invincible and immortal system-wise. There has to be some kind of weak point, some strategy.”

The two girls in the front seats looked at each other and smiled meaningfully.

“Huh?” Haruyuki was baffled. “Um. Did I say something weird?”

“No, we were just thinking you sounded like the idiot hero somehow, Corvus,” Fuko remarked.

“Honestly.” Kuroyukihime rolled her eyes. “But thank you, Haruyuki.”

“But Haru,” Chiyuri added. “I dunno about being so touchy-feely with a girl there.”

“What?”

Here, he finally realized that his hand was firmly fixed to Shihoko’s back, and he recoiled his whole body. “Whoaaa!” But with three of them in the distinctly non-spacious back seat, he ended up slamming the back of his head into the window.

Tears welling up in his eyes, he pressed a hand against his new bump, and the four girls laughed brightly.

The chime of an alarm ringing in the cabin of the car put an end to their laughter. The automatic driver AI connected to Fuko’s Neurolinker was letting her know about the arrival of a message.

Quickly flicking across her virtual desktop, Fuko composed herself and said, “It’s from Pard. They’re going back to Nerima for now.”

“Mmm. They are?” Kuroyukihime nodded. “Well then, it’s about time for us to get moving, too. Absolutely no changes to the schedule. Chiyuri will go cheer for Takumu at the Budokan, and Haruyuki and Shihoko are off to take care of Hoo at school, hmm?”

“Yes!” Haruyuki said on behalf of the entire back seat.

“Okay then, first we’ll head to the Budokan entrance.” Fuko pushed the EV’s start switch. “I hope Mayuzumi’s winning and moving up the ranks.”

“The fact that we haven’t gotten a message from him means he’s winning, Sister,” Chiyuri said.

“You’re actually exactly right. Okay, let’s hurry.” Fuko pushed the steering wheel switch, and the EV automatically pulled out of the parking lot. She quickly switched to driving mode and stepped on the accelerator.

Although it wasn’t quite on par with Pard’s large motorcycle, the vehicle began to accelerate with verve, and Haruyuki looked up at the beautifully clear sky through the window. The intense light of the midsummer sun was strong enough to dazzle his eyes even through the UV IR-blocking glass.

The Umesato Junior High boys' kendo team lost in the quarterfinals in the group division and ended up not breaking into the top six, but Takumu fought hard in the individual division and got all the way to the semifinals. And although he eventually lost there, he qualified magnificently to go to the Kanto meet in August.

Haruyuki was pulling weeds around the animal hutch when Chiyuri mailed to tell him this, and he unconsciously stood and threw a fist up into the air. "All right!"

"Gah! What happened, C—Arita?"

"Sup, Prez?"

UI> WHAT'S THE MATTER, ARITA?

Questioned in the physical voices of Shihoko and Reina Izeki, who were helping him weed, and via chat by Utai, who was cleaning the inside of the hutch, Haruyuki explained the reason for his exultation.

"Oh, amazing! Mayuzumi really is good, hmm?" Shihoko stood up and clapped lightly, a smile on her face, and Hoo woke up from his drowsing to flap his wings inside the hutch. He was still a little nervous, but he seemed to like Shihoko, even though it was their first time meeting.

"Whoa, Four Eyes gets the job done. The Kanto meet's for real cool."

UI> IT'S UNFORTUNATE ABOUT THE GROUP SECTION, BUT I JUST KNOW THAT MAYUZUMI WILL BE ABLE TO MAKE IT ALL THE WAY TO NATIONALS!

Haruyuki was as pleased with Reina and Utai's praise as if they had been complimenting him personally. "Yup!" He thrust his chest out, but a prickling

pain remained in the area around his heart.

It went without saying that Takumu didn't know yet, but Utai, Akira, Satomi and Yume of the Petit Paquet group, and Rui Odagiri also were still unaware that Kuroyukihime was in a state of Unlimited EK in the Unlimited Neutral Field. She wanted to explain it to them herself at the meeting to be held that evening over dive call, so she had asked them to keep it from Utai and the others until then. They would also discuss exactly when to let the former Prominence group know what had happened.

He hadn't been able to sense any change in Kuroyukihime in the car as they returned to Suginami along Yasukuni-dori Street after dropping Chiyuri off at the Budokan. He'd never been in an Unlimited EK situation, so he couldn't really imagine what it was like, but he figured that if Kuroyukihime said it wasn't that big of a deal, then maybe it wasn't. Although he also felt like that was a bit of wishful thinking.

Nega Nebulus had never placed that much emphasis on Enemy hunting, so the fact that she couldn't dive into the Unlimited Neutral Field would pose no particular obstacle to Legion business for the foreseeable future. But when he really thought about it carefully, the problem didn't simply stop there. Because —

“...z. Heeey, Prez!”

“Huh! Ah! Yeah?!” Having had his cheek forcibly tugged, Haruyuki blinked his eyes rapidly as he awoke with a start.

At some point, Reina Izeki's exasperated face had appeared before him and he unconsciously reeled backward.

“You're *that* happy that Four Eyes made it into the top four?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Y-yeah, well, of course.” He bobbed his head up and down. “So...what did you need?”

“So I was just talking with the super prez, okay?” she started. “And, like, we were thinking maybe it's time to get some more animals for the Animal Care Club to care for, y'know?”

“Hmm...Wh-what?!” Stunned, he turned to the inside of the hutch, and Utai nodded, grinning in her gym uniform. “More...In this hutch?”

UI> IF POSSIBLE, THAT WOULD BE IDEAL. BUT NORTHERN WHITE-FACED OWLS ARE NERVOUS BIRDS, SO IT’S NOT ENTIRELY CLEAR WHETHER OR NOT HOO WOULD ACCEPT THAT. PUT ANOTHER WAY, IF WE COULD BRING HIM A FRIEND, I THINK HOO WOULD ALSO BE ABLE TO RELAX MORE.

“Right.” Haruyuki nodded. “So then, like, I wonder how much it would cost if we tried to find another northern white-faced owl as a bride at the pet stores or something.”

Utai raised an eyebrow slightly before typing in the air. UI> I SUPPOSE SO. MOST LIKELY A DOMESTIC CB INDIVIDUAL...CB IS SHORT FOR CAPTIVE BRED, MEANING AN INDIVIDUAL THAT WAS BORN AND RAISED IN CAPTIVITY. THAT WOULD PROBABLY BE AROUND 300,000 YEN, I ASSUME.

“Three hundred...” Haruyuki froze in place for about two seconds, and then shook his head vigorously. “Th-that’s a bit out of reach. So then another kind of—very reasonably priced bird...Or we could build a new hutch next to this one and get an entirely different animal. Hmm.” He suddenly turned to stare at Reina intently.

She took a nervous step back. “Wh-what, Prez?”

“Oh. I was just wondering why you wanted more animals,” he said.

“Mmm.” Reina was in her gym uniform like Utai, having changed in the school building maybe, and she scratched her ponytailed head. “It’s just like, Hoo’s all alone except for when we come to take care of him, right? During the day, at night. It’s been bugging me for a while. I just figured it’d be nice if he had a friend.”

“.....” At this slightly—well, fairly unexpected—answer, Haruyuki stared at Reina once more.

“You’re very kind, Izeki,” Shihoko said to the girl she had only met that day, a long stem of shepherd’s purse in her hand.

“Unh?! Th-that’s not it or anything.” Reina seemed embarrassed.

“I actually also take care of a pet as an afterschool activity.” Shihoko was referring not to an animal in the real world, however, but Coolu, the lesser-class

Enemy the Petit Paquet group had made friends with in the Unlimited Neutral Field. Haruyuki couldn't help but feel a shiver when she brought the Accelerated World up, but of course, Reina had no idea anything was amiss. "But when I can't go see her, I end up leaving her alone aaaaaalll that time. I'm always wishing she could make a friend to play with."

"Yeah? Right." Reina nodded in agreement, and then turned to slap Haruyuki hard on the back. "We gotta have more animals, Prez! Three hundred thousand's not happening, but we gotta find someone who can live in this hutch with Hoo, y'know?"

"R-right..."

"And..." The hand slapping his back suddenly slipped around his neck and yanked him in like Reina was putting him in a headlock. She brought her face up alongside his. "And like, you got another new girl in here! What's goin' on with your relationships, Prez?!"

"N-nothing's going on!" Haruyuki shook his head frantically, and Shihoko and Utai both cocked their heads to one side at the same time.

Just as they finished the feeding and cleaning, the school bell informed them that it was four o'clock. Even at this hour, the July summer sky was still plenty bright. Reina left them inside the school building, saying she was going to stop by the shower room, and at the school gates Haruyuki saw off Utai, who was walking home, and Shihoko, who was taking the bus from Shin-Koenji. He then stepped into the shadow of the wall and opened his e-money account on his virtual desktop.

His allowance was five hundred yen a day, including lunch money. Up until the fall of grade seven, bullies had extorted him every day for snacks and juice, so he never had anything left over. But now that Kuroyukihime had taken care of them for him, he could save three hundred yen if he kept himself to a sandwich and a carton of milk at lunch, and if he brought a packed lunch, he could save the whole five hundred. On top of that, he'd basically stopped buying games lately, so his account was charged with a pretty decent sum.

He closed the window and, after thinking for half a minute, Haruyuki turned his feet toward Asagaya, the opposite direction from his house.

Once he'd walked about a kilometer along Shinoume Highway and stopped in at a few shops in the shopping area by Minami-Asagaya Station, he headed south into the residential area. Eventually, his destination came into view, a somehow foreign-looking collection of trim white town houses. URB Asagaya Residences, a housing complex with a ninety-year history.

Of course, the buildings had been rebuilt in recent years, and the majority of the residences had been turned into large-scale condos, but in just this one corner, the initial look remained. Retracing the route in his memory, he stepped onto the side street from the main drive and came to a stop in front of one of the town houses. After staring at it briefly, he approached the gatepost and a holowindow was displayed in his field of view. He pressed the doorbell button and waited.

Finally, a face popped up in the window—Kuroyukihime, whom he'd said goodbye to at Umesato Junior High two hours earlier.

"H-Haruyuki?! What's the matter, all of a sudden?! Did something happen?!" Kuroyukihime asked, rapid-fire.

Haruyuki bowed his head, deeply. "Uh, um, I'm sorry for coming over all of a sudden! It's not that anything in particular happened. Um, uhhh, it's, uh..." He was stuck for words, unable to concisely explain his own actions.

After staring at him for about five seconds, Kuroyukihime smiled wryly. *"It must be hot outside. You might as well come in."*

"O-okay!" After bowing neatly once more, he opened the steel gate after it unlocked electronically and stepped onto the premises. Just as he came to stand in front of the building, the door opened, and Kuroyukihime's real face popped out.

"I just got out of the bath," she told him. "Apologies for my appearance."

And indeed her outfit of a large T-shirt and shorts was covering less than when they'd had the sleepover at the Arita house, but Haruyuki wasn't about to object. He shook his head vigorously from side to side, and Kuroyukihime smiled again as she beckoned him inside.

"All right, come in then."

“O-okay. Thanks for having me.”

On his second visit, Kuroyukihime’s home was as neat and tidy as ever. The one-room space with the loft was almost too large for a single teenager living by herself. There was little to nothing in the twenty-five-square-meter living room, so the enormous ninety-centimeter aquarium in the southeast corner drew the eye.

Haruyuki wanted to take a peek in the aquarium right away, but first, he held up the plastic bags dangling from both hands. “Um. Here. Supplies.”

“Wh-what?!”

He spread the contents of the bag out on the dining table in front of a stunned Kuroyukihime. “Um, Cobb salad, squash croquettes, salmon rillettes, tortilla roll, baguette sandwich, and lemon tart.”

“N-no, I understand that.” Kuroyukihime shook her head, shaking off her surprise. “But why for me? And why so much?”

Haruyuki mustered up his courage to look at her squarely. Normally, he couldn’t quite manage to meet her eyes, but when he looked now, the face beneath her still-damp black hair was drained of color and there was just a hint of redness around her eyes...or so he felt. Almost as if she had been crying in the bath.

Kuroyukihime had seemed no different from usual after returning from the Unlimited Neutral Field, and then in the car, and when they’d parted in front of the school. But there was no way that could have been the case. A duel avatar was another self born from the mold of the wounds in a Burst Linker’s heart. Hers was caught in a deadly trap, so even if she was a level niner, one of the most powerful players in the Accelerated World, he couldn’t believe that she was okay with it.

“I thought if you had a feast,” Haruyuki answered, holding her eyes with his own, “you might feel better.”

“What?”

“You don’t seem to eat a lot usually, Kuroyukihime. So I wanted you to eat loads today at least and feel better.”

She remained dumbfounded for a moment. But then suddenly, she looked like she was laughing and crying at the same time. Tears welled up in her eyes as she blinked over and over and over. “Honestly, I can’t hide anything from you all. Fuko also kept asking me if I was all right when we parted.”

“That’s...It’s only natural,” he said. “You’re the type to really show it in your face, Kuroyukihime.”

“Hmph. I don’t need *you* telling me that.” Kuroyukihime pursed her lips and then smiled once more, and Haruyuki met her eyes again.

The faint sound of the air conditioner overlapped with the cries of the cicadas coming in through the soundproofed windows. At some point, the color of the light of the sun had grown deeper, producing a breathtakingly beautiful contrast in the face of Kuroyukihime with her back to the southern window.

Coming back to himself after a few seconds, Haruyuki lowered his head once more. “Um, I really am sorry for just coming over like this. We have the meeting this evening, too. So please eat. Just whatever here you feel like you could eat is fine. Okay, I’ll leave you to it then.”

He managed to get it all out without stuttering, but the palms of his hands were drenched with cold sweat. After looking at Kuroyukihime one last time, he stuffed the biodegradable plastic bag into the pocket of his trousers and turned on his heel.

He had taken three steps down the short hallway to the entryway when a sweet fragrance chased after him, and then something hit his back rather forcefully—a soft, slender body.

Pale arms hugged him tightly in his state of paralysis. He heard a faint murmur in his ear.

“Haruyuki.”

She continued in her usual tone, but still sounded somehow like a small child holding back tears.

“Please...Would you stay with me tonight?”

To be continued.



AFTERWORD

Thank you so much for reading *Accel World 22: Sun God of Absolute Flame*.

I truly apologize for making you wait eleven months from the last volume *The Snow Sprite*. A number of things happened in 2017, and I was forced to turn my resources toward another series, but even so, that is too long of a gap, isn't it? I'm working hard to bring you the next volume as soon as possible!

A little more about the book. I have a memory of writing something about how I'd like to do a laid-back story of the everyday, but when I lifted the lid, this ended up being far from laid-back...At this point in time, the specific weight of the story is leaning toward the Accelerated World side, so I am always thinking about how I'd like to write about the real lives of Haruyuki and his friends, but the situation in the world isn't really permitting that. If I split up these twenty-two volumes by episodes, I believe we end up with Volumes 1 and 2 being the start-up arc, Volumes 3 and 4 the marauder arc, Volumes 5 through 9 the Armor of Catastrophe arc, Volume 10 short stories, Volumes 11 through 16 the ISS kit arc, and Volume 17 the White Legion arc. Lining them up like this, it seems that Volume 22 here is entering into the climax part of things, and the story will take a little more time to resolve the big issues and return to the everyday. That said, Haruyuki has promised Kuroyukihime, Niko, and the others that they would go visit his grandparents in Yamagata, and he also has to run for student council with class representative Ikuzawa. I'm also thinking that I want a resolution with the White King in the next volume!

Now then, now then: If you look at the very top of the spine of this volume's Japanese edition, I believe there is "Ka-16-50" printed there. "Ka-16" means the sixteenth author whose pen name starts with "Ka" who has had a book

published by Dengeki Bunko, while “50” is the serial number for the number of books that author has released. In other words, this Volume 22 of *Accel World* is my fiftieth book.

My debut novel, *Accel World*, Volume 1 (numbered Ka-16-1, of course), was published in February 2009, so it has taken me eight years and nine months to get here. When I look back, it feels both long and like the time passed in the blink of an eye, but at any rate, the fact that I have been able to amass fifty books is thanks to nothing other than the readers who have been rooting for me all this time. Let’s say the next turning point is a hundred volumes, and although it’s not entirely certain that I’ll be able to make it there, I will work hard toward that goal, so I would appreciate your support!

I also have to thank my illustrator HIMA, and my editors Miki and Adachi, who I left idle for nearly a year and then in the end made progress on the knife’s edge. For the next volume, the gap and the progress will be faster! I am really going to try, I promise!

Reki Kawahara

On a certain day in October 2017

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